THE VENNER CRIME

By

JOHN RHODE

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ginning to end. But doesn't it occur to you that the effort involved, the putting into action of complicated police machinery throughout the country, was a trifle unnecessary?"

"Well, I don't know," Hanslet replied in a puzzled tone. "The man had to be found somehow."

Dr. Priestley smiled. "You must bear in mind the Superintendent's position, Faversham," he said. "As a prominent officer of police, he not unnaturally holds the view that the community should spare no trouble or expense to secure the arrest of a criminal. Whether you or I agree with him is a different matter."

"Oh, I agree with him!" Faversham exclaimed. "Up to a certain point, that is. I think that instances do occur in which no great harm would be done, and a lot of money would be saved, by letting the criminal escape. If in the long run he could escape, that is. And that brings me to what I really meant. Time would have done the Superintendent's work, and far more economically."

"I should like to hear you elaborate that statement, Faversham," remarked Dr. Priestley.

Sir Alured lay back in his chair, and blew a cloud of fragrant smoke into the air. "It's a matter that has often interested me," he replied. "I'm by way of being a student of criminology. I have to be, since I am constantly being called as an expert witness where pathological questions are involved. And I have come to the conclusion that, under ordinary circumstances, no member of a civilised community can disappear indefinitely. They may be lost to sight for a longer or shorter period, but eventually they are bound to be found."

"I can't altogether agree with you there, Sir Alured," said Hanslet, with due deference. "There are quite a

number of cases on record of people having disappeared, and no trace of them ever having been found."

"I expressly stipulated ordinary circumstances," Faversham replied. "I'm willing to bet that in every one of the cases you mention the circumstances were in some way abnormal. The disappearance was long premeditated, and the necessary preparations made in advance, for example.

"But take the case of the ordinary man who, for reasons not necessarily criminal, finds it advisable to disappear at short notice. Take the case you've just been telling us about, since it is typical. Here you have a man, whom we'll call Jones. He commits an unpremeditated murder, and decides to seek safety in flight.

"In many crimes, the difficulty which the police have to face is to discover who did it. In this particular case that difficulty did not exist. You knew for a certainty that Jones was the murderer, and your problem resolved itself into arresting Jones. That's so, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right," replied Hanslet. "We saw at once that—well, Jones—was our man. There was never the slightest doubt about that."

"That being so, your first business was to find out all there was to be known about him. Like most of us, he had friends, relations, a circle of acquaintances. You could discover without difficulty his occupation, habits, and so forth. You could secure an accurate description of his appearance, which you could check from many sources. You were able to secure a recent photograph.

"Naturally, you made full use of this information. You issued the description and photograph to the press. You invoked the aid of the B.B.C. Not only every police constable, but every citizen, almost without exception, gradually became as familiar with the appearance of Jones as they are of that of any famous film

star. And I maintain that if the police had gone quietly about their ordinary business, Jones would inevitably have been arrested, sooner or later."

Dr. Priestley nodded. "There is a good deal to be said in favour of your contention, Faversham," he remarked.

But seeing that Hanslet was still incredulous, Faversham continued. "Put yourself in Jones' place, Superintendent. From the moment your description was circulated, and the photograph reproduced, he was cut off from the rest of the community. Only by taking the most desperate risks could he show himself, or communicate in any way with his fellow men.

"No man can effectively change his appearance without certain appliances, a wig, for instance. Jones could not secure access to these appliances. He had to purchase food, but he ran grave risk of capture every time he did so. And what was he to do when his supply of cash was exhausted? He could not replenish it from his bank, and he dare not apply for employment.

"As it happened in this case, Jones fell in with one of the very few who was not familiar with his features, and this person gave him shelter. But, even if you had not tracked him down, Superintendent, his security must have been only temporary. Eventually this person's attention would have been called to the likeness between the lodger and the much advertised Jones. Nobody, one must assume, knowingly shelters a wanted man unless they are involved in his crime. And then the game would have been up."

"You may be right, Sir Alured," said Hanslet. "But I don't think the authorities would take that view. According to you, the police, having circulated a description, should sit down and wait until they received information which would enable them to arrest the missing man."

Faversham smiled tolerantly. "Under ordinary circumstances—I am bound to emphasise that—I think they would save the State money and themselves trouble, by doing so."

Hanslet took his pouch from his pocket, and began to fill a large and well-blackened pipe. It was a lengthy process, and was followed by laborious puffing till the tobacco was well alight. Not until he was satisfied that the pipe was drawing properly did he make any comment. Then, with exaggerated carelessness, he addressed Sir Alured. "So you would expect Ernest Venner to turn up any moment?"

Dr. Priestley watching them both, saw Faversham's expression turn to one of astonishment. "Ernest Venner?" exclaimed the pathologist. "Why, what on earth has he got to do with it?"

Hanslet allowed himself a moment in which to enjoy Faversham's surprise. "Why, didn't you know, Sir Alured?" he replied innocently. "Ernest Venner has been missing from his home for nearly a week. He was last seen on Wednesday the 15th to be exact. We've put the usual notice in the papers, and there has been an S.O.S. broadcast."

"It seems, Faversham, that after all there are people whom these messages do not reach," remarked Dr. Priestley quietly. "As it happens, I saw the notice in *The Times*. The name caught my eye. This Ernest Venner is, I suppose, the same man who achieved momentary notoriety recently in connection with the death of his uncle?"

"That's the chap, Professor," Hanslet replied. "I thought Sir Alured might be interested to hear that he was missing."

"Trying to pull my leg, in fact," laughed Faversham. "No, I must admit that I had heard nothing of it. But that doesn't affect my argument. Venner's disappear-

ance has not received nearly the publicity that Jones' did, for obvious reasons. You're quite right, though, I am interested. What are the facts?"

Hanslet shrugged his shoulders. "There are no facts to speak of," he replied. "Venner shares a flat in South Kensington with his sister, as you probably know. The sister's statement is that he walked out of the flat on Wednesday evening about six. He told her that he would not be back till late, but did not say where he was going. Since then nothing has been heard of him."

"Let's see what I remember of Venner. I only saw him once, at the inquest, you know, and that's well over two months ago. His age was given as thirty-five, I remember. Height, I suppose, about five feet nine. Thin and anæmic looking. Pallid complexion, greyish eyes, thin wispy hair, wears glasses. That's about as accurately as I could describe him."

"It's fairly close to the official description, Sir Alured," said Hanslet. "His sister says he has a small mole on the left side of his neck, but it is inconspicuous, and you would have to look pretty closely at him to see it. When she last saw him he was wearing a blue serge suit, black boots, bowler hat, heavy blue overcoat, and brown gloves. He was carrying an umbrella and a small brown leather attaché case."

"And, thus equipped, he walked out of his sister's life," was Faversham's comment. "I wonder why, exactly? There are dozens of possibilities. Quite a fascinating problem for a student of human nature, in fact. One naturally supposes that the death of his uncle had something to do with it."

"His uncle died under circumstances that were considered suspicious at the time, did he not?" Dr. Priestley inquired.

"Suspicious? Well, yes. So your friend Doctor Oldland thought. He was called in at the last moment,

you know. Didn't see his way to giving a certificate. The usual story. The coroner ordered a post-mortem, and I was asked to perform it.

"Mind you, I don't blame Oldland. In fact, my experience is that doctors are far too ready to grant certificates. And in this case he knew nothing about his patient. He had an urgent call on the telephone one Sunday evening. He went to the Venners' flat, and found the uncle practically at his last gasp. They said his name was Denis Hinchliffe, and that they daren't have a doctor to him before, as he hated the medical profession like poison.

"Oldland told me that he saw at once there was nothing to be done for the fellow. He was suffering from violent spasms, contraction of the muscles, arching of the body, and so forth. Incidentally, he had rather a nasty looking wound on the back of his right hand. Oldland gave him a whiff or two of chloroform, but he couldn't do much more. His patient died about half an hour after he was called in."

"The symptoms rather suggest strychnine poisoning," said Dr. Priestley.

"So Oldland thought. Strychnine poisoning or tetanus. You couldn't tell which, seeing only the last phase like that. Well, as I say, I carried out the post-mortem. Tetanus, right enough. The condition of the wound on the right hand showed the source of the infection. The jury was satisfied with my evidence, and brought in a verdict of death from natural causes."

"They would hardly venture to question your decision, Faversham," remarked Dr. Priestley.

"Much obliged for the compliment, Priestley. I know exactly what is in your mind. The verdict in the Claverton affair. I made a bloomer there, I'm prepared to admit. But the very fact that I was misled there has made me doubly careful on subsequent occa-

sions. In fact, in this case of Hinchliffe's I was on the look out for a dodge of some kind. But really it was quite simple. The symptoms could only have been caused by strychnine or tetanus, lock-jaw, as we used to call it. You can't possibly miss strychnine if it's present in the organs, and you must remember that I was definitely looking for it. There simply wasn't a trace of strychnine or any other poison. Tetanus was the only alternative.

" Of course, Hinchliffe would probably have lived if Oldland had been called in earlier. Inoculation in the early stages would almost certainly have saved him. The coroner made some pretty forcible remarks about that, as you may remember, if you read the report of the inquest."

" Maybe the business was a lot more suspicious than Sir Alured knows about," Hanslet muttered with his pipe in his mouth.

" My only connection with the case was in the capacity of expert witness," said Faversham. " I only saw the various people concerned at the inquest. What do you know about it, Superintendent?"

" Quite a lot, one way and another," replied Hanslet, grinning broadly. " We do get to know things at the Yard, now and then. The coroner tipped us the wink, and we were busy making a few inquiries while you were cutting up the body, Sir Alured."

" Would it be indiscreet to inquire what you learned as a result of those inquiries?" Dr. Priestley asked.

" Well, Professor, we aren't supposed to give away official secrets, as you know. But there's no harm in telling you two gentlemen. You won't repeat anything outside this room, I'm sure. And, anyhow, I needn't go into details.

" The way we looked at it was this. If it turned out that Hinchliffe had died of poison, it looked very

like murder. Opportunity was there all right. Nobody had seen him since he had been ill but Venner and his sister. Had they, either or both of them, any motive for murder?

"We began by making inquiries regarding Hinchliffe. He was a man of sixty, who had been in business as a moneylender until a year or two ago, and was said to have made a very good thing out of it. He had no permanent address, but since his retirement had stayed anywhere that happened to take his fancy. The last place he stayed at was the Mermaid Hotel, at Bindon-on-Sea. Here he got a touch of influenza, and was fetched away by the Venners in their car on August 24th, ten days before his death.

"The Venners came next, of course. They live in a flat over a shop. 7 Clewer Street, South Kensington, is the address. Ernest Venner is in business as an importer of fancy goods, with an office at 212 Ludgate Hill. Was in a pretty flourishing way at one time, but has been hardly hit this year by the import duties. In fact, when his uncle died his affairs were in a pretty bad way. His sister, Christine Venner, keeps house for him. Not a bad-looking girl in her way, but rather of the flashy type, if you know what I mean. Has a small income of her own, and thinks of nothing but amusing herself."

Faversham laughed. "By jove, it would have been a poor look-out for Venner if I had found strychnine in his uncle's body!" he exclaimed. "You had your motive all cut and dried. Venner murders Hinchliffe, in order to relieve his financial embarrassments by inheriting the fortune made in the money-lending business. It would have been as clear as daylight!"

"So we thought at the time, Sir Alured," replied Hanslet gravely. "If the verdict had been other than

it was, we should have arrested Ernest Venner at the close of the inquest."

Dr. Priestley got slowly out of his chair. He seemed to find the fire too hot, for he walked across to his desk, and sat down at it. "You would probably have been justified in arresting Venner," he said. "But you know as well as I do, Superintendent, that theories which appear to be obvious at first sight often prove false in the end."

"It's no use arguing about what might have happened," said Faversham, before Hanslet could reply. "You can take it from me that Hinchliffe died of tetanus, and that Venner is not a murderer. He was guilty of contributory negligence, if you like, for not calling in a doctor before he did. But, upon my word, I can sympathise with him. Just consider his position. If it's true—and I see no reason to doubt it—that Hinchliffe had a rooted aversion to doctors, what could he do? Hinchliffe would not have shown any very alarming symptoms until the last. And if his nephew had insisted on calling in a doctor before then, he might have walked straight out of the flat. Yes, and cut Venner off with a shilling, into the bargain. If Venner really was his heir, that is."

"Venner inherited all his uncle's money," said Hanslet. "Miss Venner told the police that when she reported her brother's disappearance the other day."

"Well, it's really beside the point, since we know that Venner didn't murder his uncle. But it does add an interest to his disappearance, as you call it. Now, I'm inclined to think that this is a case of disappearance under abnormal circumstances, and that Venner will not be heard of again."

"And yet you said just now that Jones would have turned up in any case," Hanslet retorted.

"Yes. But the two cases are totally different. Jones

disappeared because he had the instinct to conceal himself, and at a moment's notice. So far as we know, there was no urgent necessity for Venner to disappear. He was not wanted by the police, for instance. And, no doubt, all his arrangements were carefully made beforehand."

"Then in your opinion, this man Venner has effaced himself voluntarily?" Dr. Priestley remarked.

"Effaced himself! That's better. I don't like the term disappearance, for nobody can disappear, in the scientific sense of the word. He can only cease to be visible to his own particular circle. But I have no opinion on the matter, I'm merely offering a suggestion. One might go so far as to classify these cases of people vanishing from their usual surroundings."

The subject interested the Superintendent. He was always willing to learn. Experience had shown him that a detective's education was never complete. And he had the greatest respect for the intellectual powers of men like Dr. Priestley and Sir Alured Faversham. Theorists, of course, with no practical experience. But still, even theorists could be worth listening to.

"And how would you classify them, Sir Alured?" he asked.

Faversham smiled. "I seem to have done most of the talking this evening," he replied. "Suppose we refer that question to our host? He's far more competent to answer it than I am."

Dr. Priestley laid down the pencil which he had picked up. "I do not know that my system of classification would meet with your approval, Faversham," he said. "I should divide these cases into four classes. First, disappearance due to death, by murder, suicide, or accident. A man might be murdered, and his body hidden in a wood. He might throw himself into the sea. He might fall into a well.

"The second class is disappearance due to guilt. Jones, whose case we were discussing just now, is a sufficient example of this. The third class is due to psychological causes. Worry, loss of memory, mental aberration. A man may wander away from home with no fixed purpose in his mind. And the fourth class is deliberate disappearance, due to dissatisfaction with a man's existing environment. A desire to make a clean cut from the past, in fact."

Faversham nodded approvingly. "You couldn't have expressed it better, Priestley!" he exclaimed. "Now, I think the Superintendent will agree that in the great majority of cases disappearance is only temporary, so far as the first three cases are concerned. A body, or some portion of it, rarely remains for long undiscovered. The police, I still maintain, if they are aware of the identity of a criminal, must rarely fail to run him to earth. A man who wanders from home with no fixed purpose is bound to be traced before very long.

"All these classes come within my definition of ordinary circumstances. But, in the fourth class, the man creates the circumstances for himself, and can thus ensure that his self-effacement shall be permanent. He makes his preparations in advance. He supplies himself with funds. He prepares a disguise—I don't, of course, mean a false nose and side-whiskers. His disguise will consist of an alteration in appearance, clothes and habits.

"Let me give you an example, Mr. Hanslet. I walk out of here to-night, and don't turn up at my flat. After a bit, the usual description is circulated and broadcast, without result. What has happened? Why, simply this. I have dyed my hair red, and grown a beard and moustache, also gracefully tinted the same colour. I have arrayed myself in kilt and tam-o'-shanter, and opened a second-hand book-shop in Peebles. And even

if you were to come into that shop in search of a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses,* you wouldn't recognise me. Unless, and this is important, you had some reason to suppose that the man behind the counter was really the missing pathologist."

Hanslet laughed heartily as he drew a mental picture of the transformed Sir Alured. "No, you're right there," he replied. "I certainly shouldn't recognise you. I don't believe even the Professor would, either. And you think that this chap Venner may have done something of the kind? I can't see why a man who has just come into a lot of money should want to take himself off like that."

"Don't you? I can imagine all sorts of reasons. But it is merely a suggestion on my part. He's got the money, you say?"

"Yes, his sister told us that. His uncle's estate was finally settled up a day or two before he disappeared."

"Well, it doesn't seem to me very difficult to understand his feelings. In fact, I think his taking himself off like that so soon after he got hold of the money explains everything. He'd had a pretty rotten time, you know, one way and another. His business was in a bad way, you say. Perhaps he thought it was no good chucking good money after bad in an attempt to pull it round. Better let it go altogether.

"Then there was that fuss about the inquest. It can't be a very pleasant experience to be suspected of murder, even if you are definitely proved innocent. You know what people are. Years hence, when his name is mentioned, somebody will say, 'Wasn't that the chap who's supposed to have murdered his uncle?' It doesn't matter if the other chap replies, 'The verdict was natural causes, you know!' The notoriety sticks just the same."

"But why should he just clear out like that, with-

out saying a word to anybody, even his sister?" Hanslet asked.

"What was your expression, Priestley? Dissatisfaction with his existing environment. That's it in a nutshell. Why didn't he tell his sister that he was going? Because she would have nagged at him to let her go too, and help spend Uncle Hinchliffe's money. I don't know. But can't you imagine a man in his position wanting to make a clean sweep of it? Clear right out, start somewhere else, forget all his business worries, and sound of his sister's voice, the things people were probably saying about him? I'm not at all sure that I shouldn't have done the same."

"Well, if that's the case, it's his own affair," said the Superintendent. "In any case, we shan't spend much public money looking for him. We've other things to do. The crooks keep us busy enough, as it is."

"Crooks!" exclaimed Faversham bitterly. "Wretched devils who take to crime as a means of a livelihood, I suppose you mean. And yet you let a super-crook like that scoundrel Carne make away with millions under your very noses!"

"I don't think you can hold the police responsible for the Carne Trust crash, Sir Alured," replied Hanslet.

"No, I suppose not," said Faversham with increasing bitterness. "Fools can't be protected from the results of their own actions. But if you had lost half your life's savings, as I have, you'd modify your ideas of what constitutes a crook, I fancy."

He stood up suddenly, and remained motionless for a moment, frowning at the fire. Then he turned to Dr. Priestley. "Time I was going home," he said abruptly. "I needn't tell you that I've enjoyed our yarn this evening."

Hanslet had risen too, and Dr. Priestley accompanied his guests to the door. After their departure, he re-

turned to his study, where he picked up the poker, and stirred the remains of the fire absently.

One might have judged from his quiet smile that he too had enjoyed the conversation.

2

To Dr. Priestley dinner was more than the most important meal of the day. It was a rite, to be performed with due solemnity and elaboration. He was an epicure, and proud of the fact. He insisted upon good food and good wine, and he liked to consume them in congenial company.

It was not surprising, therefore, that he should invite his old friend Doctor Oldland to dinner, two evenings later. He had known Oldland intimately many years before, but for various reasons had lost sight of him. The circumstances surrounding the death of a mutual friend, Sir John Claverton, had brought them together again, and since then Oldland had been a fairly frequent visitor to Dr. Priestley's house in Westbourne Terrace. That is, when the demands of his extensive and flourishing practice in South Kensington allowed him the necessary leisure.

They had finished dinner and repaired to the study, which, as Dr. Priestley always maintained, was the most comfortable room in the house. They sat on opposite sides of the fire, and at Oldland's elbow was a table bearing a siphon of soda and a decanter of whisky. Dr. Priestley was always careful to study his guest's tastes.

"Faversham was dining with me a couple of nights ago," remarked Dr. Priestley casually, during a pause in the conversation.

"Is he living in town now, then?" replied Oldland.

"I thought he spent most of his time at his place in the country."

"He told me that he had closed his house. Lady Faversham and the two daughters are wintering in Jamaica, I understand."

"Shut up the house, has he? Do you know, Priestley, I shouldn't wonder if economy had something to do with that. I did hear that he had been pretty badly hit by the Carne smash. I don't know whether there's anything in it."

"I'm afraid that is perfectly true," replied Dr. Priestley. "Faversham was telling me about it when he was here. He seems to have suffered very severely. I dare say you know that he has always rented a small flat in Margaret Street, not far from his laboratory, which is just off Cavendish Square. He used it when he had to stay in London overnight, and this winter he is living there entirely."

"I never liked the sound of the Carne Trust," said Oldland. "I don't know why, for I don't profess to be a financial expert. Lots of fellows used to tell me it was a good thing, but thank goodness, I never put any money in it. I'm sorry about Faversham, I've always liked him, though I never knew him really well. The last time we met was over that Hinchliffe business. I dare say you remember that."

"Faversham and Superintendent Hanslet, who dropped in after dinner, were discussing it the other night." Anyone who knew Dr. Priestley well would have detected a shade of encouragement in his voice, as though he would welcome further discussion of the subject.

"Hanslet, eh?" exclaimed Oldland thoughtfully. "So the police had their fingers in the pie, had they? I'm not surprised, I didn't like the look of things when I was called in. It looked to me very much as though

Venner or his sister had been up to something. They were total strangers to me, mind you, I'd never set eyes on either of them before. They sent for me, I suppose, because I live only a few hundred yards from their place."

"And you went at once?" suggested Dr. Priestley.

Oldland sipped his whisky and soda. "Yes, I went at once," he replied. "Usual sort of message over the telephone. Would Doctor Oldland come at once to 7 Clewer Street. No particulars, of course. A doctor is lucky if he gets any idea beforehand of what is expected of him. Nine o'clock in the evening of Sunday, September 3rd. I'd just finished dinner, and off I went, emergency bag and all.

"Clewer Street is a little by-way with perhaps a dozen shops in it. Each has a flat above, and I rang the bell of number 7. They were expecting me all right, for a woman opened the door at once."

Oldland paused, and took another sip of his drink. "Christine Venner wouldn't like it if she heard me call her a woman," he continued thoughtfully. "Queer, isn't it, that members of the female sex below the age of forty or so resent the appellation? You may call a boy a man, and he'll be complimented. But you mustn't call a girl a woman.

"However, I'm old-fashioned enough to expect a girl to be girlish. And there's nothing girlish about Christine Venner. Somewhere on the borderland between the twenties and thirties, I suppose. But any native charm she may possess is most effectively disguised. She's artificial, Priestley, inside and out. But I'm boring you with these details?"

"Not in the least," replied Dr. Priestley. "The professional outlook upon mankind is always entertaining."

"Well, she isn't my patient, thank goodness. That's how she struck me, as she opened the door that evening.

Artificial. Paint, powder, all the rubbish that women use under the name of cosmetics. Might just as well have put on a mask and wig, and had done with it. Why do they do it, Priestley? Are they ashamed of their own individuality, or what?"

"The instinct of the female is to make herself attractive to the opposite sex," Dr. Priestley replied oracularly.

"To me, the effect is repellent. But maybe you're right. You wouldn't accuse me of vanity. I'm too old and ugly for that. It wasn't a masculine fancy, I'll swear. The first thing she did was to look me over appraisingly. To her, first and foremost, the strange doctor was a male. Was there any capital to be made out of him?

"Her decision was unfavourable. I'm ready to swear that she felt a pang of disappointment when she found he wasn't young and good-looking. However, she was pleasant enough in her artificial way. Artificial voice, artificial manners. She even moved artificially, as though she were a wax model with some sort of mechanism inside her.

"She was very grateful to me for coming round so quickly. Venner was her name, Christine Venner. She lived with her brother Ernest. Their uncle, Mr. Hinchliffe. was staying with them, and he had been taken ill.

"All this while she was taking me upstairs. She showed me into the drawing-room, which was one of those horrible apartments in the modern style. Furnished and decorated with a view to achieving the maximum of ugliness and discomfort. Here she left me, saying she would fetch her brother.

"I sat down in the least angular chair and waited. And after a bit Ernest Venner come in. As you know, Priestley, doctors shouldn't have prejudices. But I took

dislike to the fellow from the moment I shook hands with him. I once went for a cruise on a drifter and helped to take flounders out of a net. Venner's handshake brought that experience vividly back to me.

"If his sister was artificial, he was negative. You know what I mean, I expect. He struck me as the sort of man who had never played any game, never taken part in any sport, never acquired any knowledge worth having, and consequently was devoid of any virtues or vices worth mentioning.

"He got down to business at once, though. His uncle had come to stay a few days previously, and had appeared to be suffering from a slight attack of influenza at the time. You may remember that although the weather was warm at the time, there was quite a lot of it about. Venner had insisted upon his going to bed, and buying some stuff at the chemist's, but that was all he could do.

"I couldn't quite make out what he meant by that's all he could do! But he soon enlightened me. Hinchliffe couldn't bear doctors. Never would stay in the same room with one, if he could help it. Certainly would never consult one. Had threatened to get up and leave the house if the word doctor was mentioned in his presence.

"One gets used to that sort of thing. However intractable people may be, they soon shout for a doctor if they feel any acute pain. I merely asked if the influenza had taken a turn for the worse. I suspected that the chemist's stuff hadn't done its job and that the patient had developed pneumonia.

"Venner replied that he didn't know whether it was the influenza, or what it was. But for the last few days his uncle had been attacked by convulsions. He went rigid all over, and suffered severe pains, like cramp. And these attacks left him very exhausted. At last,

after a particularly severe bout, Venner had taken his courage in both hands, and sent for me.

"I didn't like the sound of that at all. You must remember that I knew nothing whatever about these people. And it struck me that Venner's description sounded about as near as a layman would get to the symptoms of strychnine poisoning.

"I started the ordinary routine questions. What had the patient had to eat, and so forth. He hadn't had much to eat, didn't seem to be able to swallow solid food. But he had had a few cups of tea, and several glasses of his favourite drink. Naturally, I asked what that was. Venner told me, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Creme-de-menthe and rum, half and half!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Priestley, his gastronomic susceptibilities shocked to the utmost.

"Sounds a horrible concoction, doesn't it? I've always said, like Jurgen, that I'd try every drink once. But I don't think I could face that!

"I suggested that I had better see the patient, and Venner took me to his room. The first thing that caught my eye was Christine Venner doing something to her eyebrows in front of the glass. Upon my word, Priestley, her reflection looked less artificial than the original. However, she slipped out of the room as soon as we came in.

"I walked over to the bed, and then for the first time I saw Denis Hinchliffe. Nothing in common with his nephew, I can promise you that. I've found adjectives for the other two. Shall I say that Hinchliffe was defiant? You saw it in every line of his face, defiance of the world, of all convention, and most of all of death, which I saw at the first glance was not very far away.

"But before I could say a word, he was seized with a convulsive spasm. Complete rigidity of the muscles,

sus sardonicus, arching of the back, and all the rest of . Venner shot a sort of I-told-you-so look at me. know what he meant. The very sight of one of the athed profession had sent his uncle off like this.

" But I knew better. I'd seen that sort of thing be- re. It's typical of these cases that the slightest ex- rnal influence will produce a spasm. Our entrance ould be quite sufficient. I didn't waste any time, ut got to work with the chloroform and an injection of hloral. There was a look of agony in that wretched ian's eyes that I don't care to remember.

" I can tell you, I was thinking pretty hard while I vas attending to him. As I dare say you know, Priest- ey, there are only two things which could cause spasms ke that. One of them is tetanus, and the other poison- ng by strychnine or one of its allies. If it was tetanus, noculation wouldn't be much good to him at this tage. And if it was strychnine, I couldn't do anything or him until I had got his muscles relaxed.

" As soon as the chloroform had taken effect, I set o work to examine him. And the first thing that I dis- overed was that he had a bandage, a very amateur sort f affair, round his right hand. I took this off, and ound a jagged cut, about an inch long, on the back of is hand. It was obviously some days old, and looked o me distinctly septic."

Oldland paused, and finished his drink. He was pour- ng out a second as Dr. Priestley spoke. " Having in nind the possibility of tetanus, I suppose you inquired nto the origin of this wound?" he asked.

" I did. It seemed to provide an excellent opening for tackling Venner. I told him that his uncle's symp- toms suggested tetanus. I was careful to say nothing about strychnine, for fear of putting him on his guard. And then I asked him about the wound.

" It happened some ten days before. Venner told me.

It seems that he and his sister had driven down to some seaside place or other, where Hinchliffe was staying at the time. They found him none too well, and decided to bring him back to London with them. Venner had had a slight accident with the car a couple of days before, and torn one of the front wings. As they were getting Hinchliffe into the car, he caught his hand on the jagged edge.

"I asked Venner if the wing was fairly clean at the time, and he said that it wasn't. It had been raining hard all day, and he had taken the wrong turning on the way down, and ended up in a farm-yard, where the car sank into mud up to the axles.

"Those are just the conditions under which a man might pick up tetanus. And the history of the case, as Venner described it, bore out the tetanus diagnosis. Apart from the influenza—which I fancy can have been no more than a very heavy cold—Hinchliffe had been all right until three days before I was called in. Then he began to complain of pains in the back of his head and neck. This had been followed by comparatively mild convulsions, which had gradually grown worse.

"I hadn't time for any lengthy discussions with Venner. Hinchliffe took up most of my time. Not that there was ever the least hope of saving him. The poor chap died of exhaustion before I had been in the house for a couple of hours.

"I'd made up my mind by that time that I wasn't going to give a certificate. And I told Venner so, straight out. I said that a doctor ought to have been called in at the first symptoms of convulsion, whatever the patient might have said. The matter would have to be reported to the coroner, who would act as he thought best."

"You were not satisfied as to the cause of death?" asked Dr. Priestley.

" How could I have been? I knew nothing of the history of the case, except what Venner chose to tell me. The tetanus theory was plausible enough. There was nothing to contradict it. But there was always the other alternative. Hinchliffe might have taken strychnine, presumably, if Venner was telling the truth, over a period of three days. Of course, Faversham disposed of that possibility. He found no trace of strychnine in the body. Indeed, all the appearances indicated tetanus."

Dr. Priestley took up the poker, and stirred the fire scientifically. " I am not a pathologist," he said. " Is the cause of death always revealed with certainty by a post-mortem and subsequent analysis?"

" In the great majority of cases, yes," Oldland replied. " You're thinking of poor Claverton's death. But that was in every way an exceptional case. Faversham found nothing then, because there was nothing to find. You were present when he made his tests, I remember. But this was a different matter altogether. Hinchliffe died either of tetanus or strychnine poisoning. Faversham's job, therefore, was perfectly straightforward. He had to test for strychnine or similar alkaloid, such as brucine. Since he didn't find it, Hinchliffe hadn't been poisoned. There isn't room for a shadow of doubt. After all, you know, Priestley, Faversham is the biggest man we've got in that line."

" I am perfectly ready to believe that Faversham could not be mistaken upon such a direct issue," said Dr. Priestley. " Did you attend the post-morten yourself?"

" No, I didn't. It was like this. Faversham came round to see me on the Monday evening. He told me that the coroner had ordered a post-mortem in the case of Denis Hinchliffe deceased, and asked him to carry it out. He had been informed that I had attended the case, and had looked in for a few particulars.

"I gave him what details I could, and told him the conclusions I had come to. We had a long chat. He told me that the post-mortem had been fixed for three o'clock the following afternoon, and asked me if I would care to be present. I promised to come unless I had an urgent call, and we left it at that. But when I got back from my morning rounds just before two, I found a message from Faversham saying that he had been compelled to alter the time to twelve. When I saw him next day at the inquest, he was very apologetic. He had been summoned to a conference at the Home Office, and had to fit in the post-mortem in the morning. I wasn't sorry for I was very busy just then.

"But, if I didn't see Faversham at work, I heard him give his evidence. He understands the rôle of expert witness better than any man I ever met. Just states the bare facts, and won't even commit himself to an opinion. The coroner had to drag the cause of death out of him by main force. 'Let me put it this way, Sir Alured. If a person dies from the effects of strychnine, the poison can always be found in the body after death?' 'That is so.' 'You examined the body of the deceased?' 'I removed the organs which would have absorbed the poison, and subjected them to analysis.' 'You carried out tests in order to detect the presence of strychnine?' 'Yes.' 'Did you find any trace of the poison, however slight?' 'No.' 'Thank you, Sir Alured, I think that settles the matter?' And, of course, it did."

"Leaving no room for doubt as to the cause of Hinchliffe's death," remarked Dr. Priestley. "But that event occurred a good many weeks ago now. Have you seen either of the Venners since?"

"I saw Ernest Venner about three weeks ago. You know that he has been missing for some days, don't you?"

"Faversham was talking about that when he was

here a couple of nights ago. He propounded a most interesting theory to account for it. He suggested that Venner might have left home to start life afresh in some different sphere.''

Oldland picked up his glass, and watched the bubbles rising slowly to the surface of the fragrant liquid. "Well, it's not a bad suggestion in its way," he said. "People have done that, we know. But not Venner. He'd never have screwed himself up to the necessary pitch of determination. I tell you, the man's negative. And to start life afresh is a definitely positive action. It needs a certain amount of moral courage, for one thing."

He put down his glass, and stared moodily into the fire. Dr. Priestley, knowing the strange romance of his early years, respected his silence. After a few minutes his face brightened, and he took a long pull at his drink.

"Sorry, Priestley," he said. "The past will intrude itself sometimes, however hard we try to forget it. Venner? No, Venner isn't made of that sort of stuff. Irresolute. Couldn't even give his evidence at the inquest without contradicting himself over the simplest facts. Not like his sister. She positively revelled in it. All she was thinking about was how her photograph would look in the papers. Sort of woman who positively thrives in the limelight."

"You said, I think, that you saw Ernest Venner some three weeks ago?" said Dr. Priestley persuasively.

"Sorry, again. You ought to know by this time that I get most damnably loquacious after a good dinner. Yes, I saw him all right. He wrote me a note, asking me to come round and see him. I went that very evening. Christine Venner was out, heaven knows where. Dancing to the bleat of the lachrymose saxaphone, I expect. Just the type that pretends to enjoy that sort of horrible noise. Anyhow, I didn't ask.

" Rather to my surprise, Venner was quite friendly, in his negative fashion. I expected that he would bear me a grudge for the attitude I had taken when his uncle died, but not a bit of it. He was quite effusive. Thanked me for coming so promptly, talked about the weather, the political situation, goodness knows what. I saw he had something on his mind, and couldn't come to the point.

" Then at last he told me that he hadn't been at all himself recently. No physical symptoms to speak of, but his nerves were all to pieces. Couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't attend to business properly. Could I do anything for him?

" He looked a bit haggard, certainly, and he couldn't sit still for more than two or three minutes together. Mind you, I had never seen him under what you might call normal circumstances, so I didn't know what he was like usually. I asked him as tactfully as I could if anything was worrying him. And then he began to babble about his uncle's death.

" I can see him now, pacing up and down that ghastly drawing-room, with a sort of stupid, puzzled expression. His uncle's death had been a terrible blow to him, the greatest shock he had ever had in his life. I let him ramble on like that, but I couldn't help thinking that a man who could reach his age without any greater misfortune happening to him than the death of an uncle, wasn't exactly an object of sympathy. However, at last I cut in. I'm afraid I was a bit brutal. I told him that he must try to get over the shock, and realise that, after all, we'd all got to die some time.

" And what do you think he said? He stopped dead and stared at me like a frightened fish. ' But not like that, doctor, not like that!" he exclaimed. And then I began to understand. Tetanus isn't the pleasantest form of death, in any case. And he'd been there and

seen it all. It wasn't grief at his uncle's decease that was the matter with him. Death himself had given him a tap on the shoulder, so to speak, and he couldn't forget it.

"I soothed him down as best I could. Told him that tetanus was not very common, that his uncle was not conscious when he died, and all that sort of thing. I didn't tell him that his uncle wouldn't have died at all if I'd been called in earlier. I was tempted to, but it seemed too much like rubbing it in, after the remarks the coroner had made at the inquest. But he only shook his head like an idiot, and said that I didn't understand. I understood, all right. The fellow was in a blue funk, and that was the long and short of it. Afraid he'd cut his finger one day and go off in the same way, I suppose.

"Well, the end of it was that I prescribed a tonic for him, and told him to send for me again if it didn't do him any good. I wasn't going to be too sympathetic, that would only have encouraged him. But he never did send for me, and the next thing I heard of him was the S.O.S. on the wireless the other night."

Dr. Priestley glanced at Oldland through his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Were you very greatly surprised when you heard the news?" he asked.

"I can't say that I was particularly interested," replied Oldland. "A doctor isn't responsible for his patient's actions, fortunately. Thinking it over, I am not altogether surprised. The man had worked himself up into an extraordinary state when I saw him. His uncle's death, or rather the manner of it, positively haunted him. I can quite well imagine that he allowed himself to brood over it until his mind became slightly unhinged. The flat reminded him perpetually of the scene he had witnessed. So one fine day he just walked out of it."

"Do you mean to imply that he was insane when he did so?"

"Who can define the borderline between sanity and insanity? He certainly was not insane in the sense that he was in a condition to be certified. But, at the same time, he was not wholly responsible for his actions. Part of his brain was functioning perfectly. The other part was blotted out by an unreasoning terror of return to Clewer Street. That's how I should look at it."

"The third class of disappearance," muttered Dr. Priestley. Then, catching Oldland's inquiring glance, "Forgive me, I was thinking aloud. A habit which becomes prevalent in old age, I believe. But, supposing your assumption were correct, surely something would have been heard of Venner by now? He was last seen on the 15th, and to-day is the 23rd. It seems a long time to elapse without any news of him."

"Oh, I don't know. You mustn't suppose that he is wandering about the streets of London, suffering from loss of memory, or anything like that. His memory isn't lost. It's only obscured by the one surpassing incident that he can't forget. He is capable of behaving quite normally, without realising exactly what he is doing.

"The most likely thing is that he is staying quietly somewhere under a false name. It's all very fine to say he would be recognised from the published description. I doubt it. Who really pays much attention to the broadcast S.O.S., unless they happen to know the name or the district mentioned? Most people wait impatiently for the announcer to get on with the programme. Take a boarding-house keeper in Bath, for instance. Does he listen assiduously to every S.O.S.? Does he bear the description in mind? Not he! And when a man walks in, and signs the visitors' book as John Robinson of Carlisle, he can't be expected to recognise him as Henry

Brown of Southend, last seen wearing plus-fours, a dinner jacket, and a yaching-cap. Most of us are only human after all."

"Is the condition in which you imagine Venner to be likely to be permanent?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"Oh, no. Without being conscious of it, he has instinctively adopted the best possible cure, like a dog instinctively eats grass when he's out of sorts. Change of scene will put him right. One of these days his mind will jolt back into its accustomed groove. The impression that has been clouding his brain will fail, and he'll hurry back to Clewer Street and the elaborately decorated Christine. And then, I suppose, I shall be called in again. Well, well! I must turn out and face the cold and bitter world again. Good-night to you, Priestley, and many thanks for your excellent dinner."

3

In spite of the fact that Dr. Priestley's scientific occupations kept him very busy during this period, he found time to devote a considerable amount of thought to the disappearance of Ernest Venner. But it must not be supposed that he felt the slightest interest in the man himself. The circumstances suggested a problem, and a problem was a lure that he could not resist.

He went so far as to instruct his secretary, Harold Merefield, to prepare a dossier of the case. To a newspaper cutting describing the inquest on Denis Hinchliffe, he added copious notes of his own, the result of what he heard from Faversham, Hanslet and Oldland. A copy of the official description of Venner when last seen completed the collection.

Merefield regarded the result without much enthusiasm. "What shall I do with this, sir?" he asked.

"Keep it where it will be readily available for reference," Dr. Priestley replied. "We may, of course, hear nothing more of the matter. But Venner's disappearance has, for me, certain features of interest. You will see from my notes that I have attempted a classification of cases of disappearance. And I shall be gratified to learn into which of these four classes this case falls."

"Two have already been suggested, sir," Merefield remarked.

"That by no means excludes the other two," replied Dr. Priestley, rubbing his hands together softly.

Faversham had got into the habit of dropping in fairly frequently to see Dr. Priestley, who always seemed glad to see him, however busy he might be. Apart from their friendship, the two had a strong mutual esteem for one another. They were not likely to agree upon any controversial scientific theory, but both thoroughly enjoyed the argument that ensued.

The truth was, as Faversham himself explained, that he was at a loose end. "I'm bored stiff, living in London by myself like this," he said on one occasion. "It wouldn't be so bad if I had Mary and the children with me, but that little place of mine in Margaret Street simply isn't big enough. And, to be quite frank with you, I can't afford anything else just now. As I told you the other night, that confounded Carne Trust business has hit me pretty hard. That's why I packed them off, and came to live up here."

"You are welcome to come here whenever you can spare the time," Dr. Priestley replied warmly. "Have you given up all idea of living in the country again?"

"I don't really know where I stand, yet. If it can possibly be managed, I shall go back to live at Markheys. I'm devoted to the place, and it hurts like hell to be away from it. And, besides, I've spent a lot of

money on it. You've never been there, though I've asked you down a dozen times. It's a pity, for you'd be interested. I've built a private laboratory of my own, and fitted it with every possible appliance. Apparatus of my own design, all sorts of gadgets that would make you open your eyes if you saw them. Even cold storage for specimens. And when this confounded crash came, I was in the middle of a series of experiments which I may never be able to resume now."

He paused, staring dejectedly into the fire. And then, with an effort, he forced himself to a more cheerful tone. "Convenient place, too," he continued. "It's not far from Weyford, in Hampshire, an hour from Waterloo. Just a comfortable distance from London, well beyond the suburban belt. Nice old house, not too big, with a fine garden. I couldn't hope to make you understand how I miss it."

"Have you let the place?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"No. I thought of trying to let it, but Mary hated the idea. She couldn't bear the thought of strangers in possession. And since I secretly sympathised with her, we gave up the idea. The house is shut up, and a woman from the village comes and airs it every day. I go down occasionally and see that everything is all right."

It was arranged that Faversham should dine at Westbourne Terrace on the following (Saturday) evening, the 25th. And Dr. Priestley, without mentioning the matter to him, told Merefield to ring up Hanslet and ask him if he was disengaged on that date. The Superintendent, who thoroughly appreciated a good dinner, eagerly accepted the invitation.

So, for the second time that week, Faversham and Hanslet found themselves as fellow-guests of Dr. Priestley. As usual, the party adjourned to the study after dinner, where sherry and cigars had been pro-

vided for Faversham, and beer for Hanslet. And it was Faversham, not Dr. Priestley, who broached the subject on which the latter was so curiously interested. "Have you heard any more of that chap Venner whom we were talking about the other night?" he asked the Superintendent.

"He hasn't turned up yet, Sir Alured," Hanslet replied. "I expect your theory was right, and he's cleared out for good. Of course I've nothing to do with the matter. But I had a look at the file we've got at the Yard, just out of curiosity. There's a record in it of the inquiries our people have made."

"Have they found out anything more than you told us the other evening?" asked Faversham idly.

"Nothing very startling. They interviewed two people who might be expected to know something about him. One was the secretary at his office, and the other was Hinchliffe's solicitor. But neither of them could throw much light on Venner's disappearance.

"They tried the office first. It's a poky little place, at the top of a dingy old building. Only a couple of rooms, with a girl in charge. Miss Edith Loveday, the Inspector who saw her told me her name was. He said how she could be content to work in such a dark hole with a name like that, he couldn't understand.

"Quite a bright girl, according to his account. Seemed to be genuinely fond of Venner, and very much upset at what had happened. She said that Venner had never been the same since his uncle's death. He had been pretty worried about the business before then. There was a bill for a biggish sum due at the end of this month, and he hadn't known how to meet it. It was natural enough that that should worry him. But, as soon as his uncle died his difficulties were at an end. Yet Miss Loveday declares that he seemed much worse after that."

"Did she give any details?" asked Faversham.

"Yes. She must be a particularly observant girl. She didn't see Venner for a week or so after Hinchliffe's death, though he spoke to her on the telephone from his flat, once or twice. He was too busy with the inquest, and the funeral, and one thing and another to go to the office, I suppose. Miss Loveday says that she had a pretty good idea that Hinchliffe's death had solved the financial problem. And she expected Venner to regard the event as not altogether an unmixed evil."

"Dutiful sorrow, not untempered by relief?" Faversham suggested.

"That's about it, Sir Alured. She was all the more astonished when he turned up. He seemed jumpy and absent-minded. In fact, I gather she found him unexpectedly difficult to get on with. She thought at first that the money must have gone astray, somehow, and that he hadn't come into anything after all. He never said a word about it, but the day before he disappeared, the fourteenth of this month, in fact, he gave her a cheque to pay into the bank, sufficient to cover the bill when it fell due."

"Did Miss Loveday mention the amount of the cheque?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"I didn't notice it in the report, Professor; I don't suppose the Inspector asked her. It's not a material point. But by that time she was completely puzzled by his behaviour. He didn't seem able to settle down to anything. He would wander about the office picking things up aimlessly and putting them down again. And she would hear him muttering to himself, though she couldn't make out what about. And more than once he asked her if she had ever thought of looking for a job which offered more opportunity."

Faversham stretched his legs out towards the fire, with the gesture of a man completely satisfied. "Pre-

paring her mind for what he was planning to do, of course," he remarked.

"It looks very like it, Sir Alured. And he went even further than that. He took a most pessimistic view of the business in spite of the fact that, according to Miss Loveday, it had been distinctly looking up for the last few weeks. He told her that circumstances might make it necessary to wind it up. Circumstances beyond his control, was the phrase he used. She says that he used it more than once."

"Meaning, of course, that he wouldn't be there to run it. It's perfectly clear, Priestley, that the fellow had already made up his mind. He was going to clear out, and leave Miss Loveday to clear up the mess. He would naturally want his disappearance to attract as little attention as possible. That's why he paid in that cheque. Did he turn up at the office on the fifteenth, the day when he was last seen by his sister?"

"Yes. He was there all day, and Miss Loveday says that he seemed not quite so restless. He told her that he had to go out of London that evening, on business connected with his uncle's death. She noticed this particularly, for it was the first time he had referred to that event. He also asked her if there was anything she wanted him to attend to, as she might not see him again that week."

"There you are!" exclaimed Faversham triumphantly. "It's as clear as daylight!"

"One moment, Superintendent," Dr. Priestley interposed. "There is a certain inconsistency in Venner's statement. If I understood you correctly the other evening, he told his sister, just before his departure, that he would not be back till late. One would naturally take that to mean that he would return the same night."

"I admire your scientific mind, Priestley," said Faversham. "But lying isn't always an exact science,

you know. It didn't matter much to Venner what he said to Miss Loveday and his sister, since he had no intention of setting eyes on them again. In fact, I should have expected a discrepancy like that. He wasn't going to tell Miss Loveday that he was off for good, so he made a vague mention of the end of the week. But if he had said that to his sister, she would have asked him where he was going. That's common sense, isn't it?"

Dr. Priestley smiled. "Your logic is certainly convincing, Faversham," he remarked.

"That's about all the Inspector got out of Miss Loveday," Hanslet continued. "Then he went to see Venner's solicitor. He got his name and address out of Miss Venner. A Mr. Coleforth, of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"Coleforth was an old man, who looked, according to the Inspector, as if he was a bit overfond of the bottle. It was three o'clock in the afternoon when he called, and Coleforth wasn't back from lunch then. The place looked decayed, as though most of the clients had dropped off. There was only a sullen-looking young chap there, who couldn't or wouldn't say when Coleforth would be back.

"However, the Inspector waited, and at last Coleforth turned up, very red in the face and a bit uncertain on his pins. The Inspector stated his business but the solicitor seemed very much annoyed at hearing Venner's name. He was no client of his. He had finished with him days ago. Didn't even know he was missing. It would be a blessing to everybody concerned if he never turned up again. And plenty more to the same effect."

"From which one may gather that Venner was not altogether popular in that quarter," Faversham remarked.

"He wasn't, though Coleforth says he had never set eyes on him till his uncle died. It was Hinchliffe

who was Coleforth's client. And Coleforth was ready enough to talk about Hinchliffe. He expressed the greatest admiration for him. A man who knew how to get on in the world, and didn't let sentiment or any damned nonsense like that stand in his way. Made a pretty pile for himself, and might have lived to enjoy it if he hadn't got into the wrong hands."

"What exactly did he mean by that?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"He didn't explain. The Inspector says that he found it very difficult to keep him to the point. His lunch, or what he had had with it, had made him very talkative. He said Hinchliffe had a certain amount of capital, and went into the money-lending business. According to Coleforth, Hinchliffe put off making a will. Said he didn't care what happened to his money when he was gone. But, when he retired, rather more than a year ago, he did make a will, leaving everything to Christine Venner. In commenting upon this, Coleforth used the phrase, 'And quite right too, for she's a damned fine girl.'"

Dr. Priestley recalled Oldland's description of her. But perhaps the solicitor's perception was not sufficiently acute to distinguish the artificial from the real. But upon what had he based his judgment? Did he know her personally? And yet his acquaintance with her brother was of very recent date. A point worth making a note of.

Faversham looked up from the contemplation of his patent leather shoes. "Hinchliffe made a will in favour of the sister?" he inquired. "But I thought you told us that Venner himself inherited his money."

"So he did, Sir Alured. Hinchliffe made a second will, in May of this year, in which he left everything to Venner. Coleforth was very indignant about it. He had never asked his advice. Hadn't even asked him to

draw up the document. Didn't care to ask him to countenance such a piece of folly, he supposed. Just sent him the new will, properly signed and witnessed, with a note asking him to destroy the old one. He never saw Hinchliffe alive after that.

"The first he heard of his client's death was from Miss Venner, who came to see him the next day. She seems to have thought that she was her uncle's heiress, and Coleforth had the unpleasant job of disabusing her mind of the idea. He didn't say how she took the news. But Coleforth went back to the flat with her and interviewed Venner, who asked him to act on his behalf.

"Coleforth, apparently, didn't take to Venner, and couldn't make anything of him. He didn't actually say so, but the Inspector is pretty sure, from his manner, that he suspected Venner of murdering his uncle. In fact, he seemed bitterly disappointed when he spoke of the verdict of the inquest. But, when that was over, he got to work winding up the estate. Venner seemed at first to be desperately anxious to get hold of the money, but later on he didn't seem to care. In fact, Coleforth confided to the Inspector that he didn't seem to know his own mind from one minute to the next.

"However, everything was cleared up by the second week in this month. Hinchliffe's estate consisted entirely of investments, which were transferred to Venner, who asked that they should be sent to his bank, the Farringdon Road Branch of the London and Kensington. Everything was finally completed at an interview between Coleforth and Venner on the thirteenth. The capital value of the securities handed over to Venner was rather more than a hundred thousand pounds."

"A very handsome fortune, if properly invested," said Faversham. "And I expect that Hinchliffe had seen to that. He'll have plenty of pocket-money to spend in his future existence. It would be interesting

to know how much ready cash he took with him. I'd rather like to have a confidential chat with that bank manager."

"The Inspector tried that, Sir Alured, but he refused to give any information. He said he could only give evidence if properly subpœnaed as a witness before a competent court."

"In which he was, I believe, perfectly correct," Dr. Priestley remarked. "The fact that Venner has apparently disappeared is no concern of his. He is still bound to respect his client's confidence. And no court exists to investigate such disappearances. The law, as I understand it, is this. If nothing is heard of Venner for seven years, his heirs, whoever they may be, will be at liberty to apply for leave to presume his death at the end of that period. The court would then consider their application, and the bank manager would then be among the witnesses called, no doubt."

Faversham laughed. "His evidence would clinch the matter, I expect. I'm willing to bet that his evidence would be to the effect that Venner was still drawing regularly on his account. Unless he meets with an accident before then, of course. But that's an interesting point of yours, Priestley. Who are his heirs, I wonder?"

"That was one of the questions which the Inspector asked Coleforth," replied Hanslet. "He was bound to consider the possibility that something might have happened to Venner. But Coleforth said that he didn't know and didn't care. He only hoped that he hadn't made a fool will, like his uncle had. For, if he died intestate, his estate would go to his sister, since he was not married."

"Mr. Coleforth appears to be more favourably disposed towards Miss Venner than towards her brother," Dr. Priestley remarked.

"Yes, as Hinchliffe seemed to be at one time," said Hanslet. "I thought, when I read the Inspector's report, that it was rather queer about those two wills. In the first place, Hinchliffe leaves everything to his niece. Then suddenly, without giving any reason, he changes his mind completely and leaves everything to his nephew."

"Speculation upon that point is useless," said Dr. Priestley. "We know nothing whatever of the relations that existed between Mr. Hinchliffe, his nephew and niece. There may have been some perfectly normal reason for the making of the second will."

"It's a queer business altogether," replied Faversham, stifling a yawn. "But we can't sit here all night discussing it."

But, after all his guests had left, Dr. Priestley did not go to bed at once. The more he heard about Venner, and his actions before he walked out of his flat, the more the problem of his disappearance appealed to him. Mainly, perhaps, because of the contradictions involved.

Faversham had seen Venner at the inquest on his uncle, and had, to some extent, studied him. Not very thoroughly, perhaps. He had no opportunity for that. But as an observant man might be expected to study an individual who was at the time a centre of public interest.

Oldland, a student of human nature, as all doctors must be, had also studied him. His opportunities had been more favourable. He had seen him twice, once at Hinchliffe's deathbed and once as a patient. Oldland's imagination was perhaps more powerful than Faversham's. He might read more from appearances. But the verbal portrait he had drawn of Venner bore the stamp of accuracy. And it seemed to fit in very closely with Miss Loveday's reported statement.

Both these men were of considerably more than average intelligence. And yet their interpretation of the same facts was widely different. Faversham believed that Venner's disappearance was permanent and premeditated. Oldland believed that it was due to temporary loss of mental balance. Which was right?

This was the question that appealed to Dr. Priestley's inquisitive mind. And, as he considered it, comfortably established in his own familiar study, he felt inclined to withhold his decision. There was always the possibility that neither might be right. There were still two classes into which Venner's disappearance might fall.

Did any of the scraps of evidence which he had heard point to either of these? Take first the possibility that Venner had fled to escape the consequences of crime. But no crime had been alleged against him. At one time there had been suspicions that he was responsible for his uncle's death. But Faversham's evidence had set that suspicion at rest. In a simple matter of fact, as this had been, no one would venture to dispute the decision of some eminent pathologist. Even Oldland, with whom the suspicion had originated, was perfectly satisfied with the verdict.

The second category seemed to be ruled out, for lack of motive. But what of the first, that he was dead, through murder, suicide or accident? In considering this, it seemed to Dr. Priestley that the significant fact was the date of the disappearance. Two days after his uncle's estate had been finally closed, he had come into the possession of the money. Why, if he had intended suicide, had he waited until then? On the other hand, his state of mind, as described by Oldland and Miss Loveday, might have led to a sudden resolve to kill himself.

Accidental death seemed highly improbable. Venner might have fallen down a disused well, or met with some

similar extraordinary fate, which would account for his body not having been found within ten days. But it was a possibility only to be considered as a last resort.

Remained murder. And, as Dr. Priestley considered this, the lines of his face hardened. From the first it had seemed to him that Venner might have been murdered. And, as the evidence had accumulated, this possibility had occupied a growing prominence in his mind. He set to work to regard it dispassionately, as was his habit.

Venner, at the moment of his disappearance, was a rich man. It was not known who his heirs were. Coleforth had said that he knew nothing of his having made a will. But, since he had also said that he only made Venner's acquaintance at the time of Hinchliffe's death, that statement was of little value. If, however, Venner had died intestate, his sister would become his heiress.

However that might be, some person or persons, at present unknown, had an understandable motive for desiring Venner's death. The evidence that he had left his flat on the evening of the fifteenth, without mentioning his destination, rested solely upon Miss Venner's statement to the police. Was this statement to be accepted implicitly?

The principal argument against the theory of murder was the difficulty of disposal of the body. Dr. Priestley knew well enough that it was the body of their victim which had brought the great majority of murderers to the gallows. It was almost impossible so to dispose of a body that no trace of it could afterwards be found.

In this case, a further difficulty arose. The only conceivable motive for the murder of Venner was the expectation of his heirs. But, in order for them to inherit, they would have to produce Venner's dead body. If they had succeeded in destroying it utterly, they would then have to wait at least seven years before death could

be presumed. And Dr. Priestley found it very difficult to imagine a criminal deliberately committing murder, in the knowledge that he could not possibly reap the reward of his crime for so long a period.

He took out the dossier which Merefield had prepared, and added to it a few notes in his execrable handwriting. Then he read it through carefully. As he completed his reading, a log which he had placed on the fire rolled over, and a sudden bright blaze shot up the chimney.

His face relaxed into a meditative smile. Was this an omen, an invitation? Should he throw the dossier into the fire, and rid his mind of Venner and his affairs? After all, Faversham was probably right. The man had decided to vanish, and if he had made his plans skilfully, nothing more would ever be heard of him.

Dr. Priestley hesitated for a moment, dossier in hand. And as he stood there, gazing into the fire, some instinct warned him that the last had not been heard of Venner. It was as though this man, known to him only from the descriptions of others, had laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

He walked slowly across the room, and put the dossier back in its cabinet. It pleased him to see how little space it occupied. It could not possibly be in anybody's way.

As he went upstairs to bed, he thought to himself, "If I am to make anything of this Venner case, I shall have to give up relying upon hearsay, and try to collect the salient facts for myself."

II

GROPING IN THE DARK

I

NEXT morning, by Dr. Priestley's orders, Harold Merefield drew up a precis of the Venner dossier, and to it added a list of dates, which read as follows:

August 24th.—Venner brought Hinchliffe in his car from Bindon-on-Sea to 7 Clewer Street.
September 3rd.—Death of Hinchliffe. Oldland called in.
September 5th.—Faversham holds post-mortem.
September 6th.—Inquest on Hinchliffe. Verdict of death from natural causes, to wit, tetanus.
November 13th.—Venner has interview with Coleforth. Obtains possession of estate.
November 15th.—Last date on which Venner was seen by his sister and Miss Loveday.

Dr. Priestley studied this list of dates in silence. Once more it struck him as significant that Venner's disappearance had closely followed the settlement upon him of his uncle's money. But this, as the dates stood, had been the final act in the drama. Any investigations he might undertake must begin much earlier than that. Earlier than the first date on the paper in front of him, in fact.

Dr. Priestley was in the habit of breakfasting early, and it was not yet ten o'clock. "Ring up Doctor Oldland, will you please, Harold," he said. "And ask him

whether it will be convenient for me to call on him before he starts on his rounds."

Merefield went to the telephone, and returned with the message that it would be quite convenient. Being Sunday, Doctor Oldland would not be going out until eleven o'clock. A taxi was thereupon summoned and a few minutes later Dr. Priestley set out.

Oldland was surprised to see him at such short notice. "You don't often honour me with a visit, Priestley," he said. "Nothing the matter, I hope? You haven't come to consult me professionally?"

"No, my system functions as well as can be expected at my age," Dr. Priestley replied. "I have not come in search of medical advice. I merely came to ask if you had called on Miss Venner since her brother disappeared."

"Called on Miss Venner!" Oldland exclaimed. It was incredible that Dr. Priestley should have come halfway across London to ask him such a ridiculous question. Not for the first time, he found himself wondering what was in his friend's mind. But he answered his question simply enough. "No, I haven't. Why should I? She hasn't sent for me."

Dr. Priestley shook his head reprovingly. "It often seems to me that doctors allow professional considerations to obscure their social duties," he said weightily. "After all, Venner was a patient of yours, and you have met his sister. Surely it would be only courteous to call on her, and offer your condolences."

Oldland stared at him for a moment, and then laughed. "Better tell me straight out what you're getting at, Priestley," he said.

Dr. Priestley permitted himself one of his rare smiles. "Do you agree that it would be a kind action on your part to call on Miss Venner?" he asked.

"I'll agree like a shot, if you'll tell me what's behind your sudden interest in her," Oldland replied.

"My interest has been aroused mainly by your description of her. I thought perhaps that if you contemplated calling upon her, you would allow me to accompany you."

"Oh, so that's it, is it!" Oldland exclaimed. "I might have guessed that the affair would have appealed to you. You want to hear what she has got to say about her brother's disappearance, I suppose? Well, I've got to pass the end of Clewer Street when I go out on my rounds. You can come with me, if you like, and we'll look in. But how are you going to explain yourself?"

"I shall, no doubt, be able to find an excuse for my intrusion," Dr. Priestley replied. And a few minutes later Oldland's car drew up outside number 7 Clewer Street.

Dr. Priestley noticed that the lower door was open. They mounted the stairs and reached the upper door, upon which was fixed an ornamental brass knocker. "Now for it!" muttered Oldland, rapping smartly. A drawling voice from within answered him. "That you, Willy? You're early, aren't you? I shan't keep you a minute."

Oldland glanced at Dr. Priestley in some dismay. "She'll be disappointed, I'm afraid," he whispered. "What do we do now? Make a bolt for it while there's still time?"

But Dr. Priestley had no time to answer.

Christine Venner's minute was unexpectedly short. They heard her footsteps, and the door was suddenly flung open, revealing a startlingly dressed young woman, who stared at them in amazement.

Before she could recover herself, Oldland spoke. "Don't you remember me, Miss Venner?" he said. "I am Doctor Oldland, and this is my friend Doctor

Priestley. As we were passing the door we thought we might as well look in."

She did not seem overpleased at the unexpected visit. However, she smiled automatically. "Very nice of you to think of me," she replied. "Come in, do."

She led the way into the drawing-room which Oldland had described. The bizarre effect of the room was rather marred by the complete untidiness which pervaded it. Christine Venner swept sundry garments off the chairs. "Sit down and make yourselves comfortable," she said.

Dr. Priestley watched her closely while Oldland made a few solicitous inquiries about her brother. Artificial, yes, and apparently perfectly heartless. She replied as though she had learnt her part by heart. No, she had heard nothing of poor Ernest. It was dreadful to think that he might be wandering about, not knowing who he was. She really didn't know what she would do if she didn't get news of him soon. But nothing serious could have happened to him, or she would have heard by now. She tried hard to think that no news was good news.

And then she stopped abruptly as though there was nothing more to be said on the subject. Dr. Priestley seized the opportunity. "You must think it very unfeeling on the part of a total stranger to intrude upon your sorrow, Miss Venner," he said. "My excuse is that I met your uncle some years ago, while he was still in business, and I thought this a fitting opportunity to offer you my condolences upon his death."

She smiled, and it occurred to Dr. Priestley that it was a smile of relief. It occurred to him that she welcomed the change of subject from her brother to her uncle. "A good many people knew Uncle Denis in those days," she replied, with a touch of malice.

Oldland with difficulty restrained a snigger. Her

meaning was obvious. He was vastly amused at the suggestion of Dr. Priestley, of all people, soliciting the aid of the deceased moneylender.

But Dr. Priestley himself appeared not to notice her insinuations. "Yes, I must say that I knew him fairly well," he continued reminiscently. "I admired him as a thoroughly able business man. Of recent years, however, I lost sight of him, to my deep regret. I heard that he had retired, and had I been able to discover his address, I should have called upon him and renewed our acquaintance."

She glanced at him curiously. "But you're a doctor, aren't you? Didn't I hear Doctor Oldland call you Dr. Priestley?"

"Not a Doctor of Medicine," he replied benignly. "Otherwise, no doubt, your uncle's well-known aversion to the medical profession might have been a bar to our friendship. I have often wondered how that aversion originated."

Christine Venner shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sure I don't know. He was like that ever since I knew him."

"Doubtless he had his very good reasons," said Dr. Priestley with a glance in Oldland's direction. "Had I known that he was living here, I should certainly have called upon him. But it was not until I saw the news of his death in the papers that I was aware that he was still in London."

"He didn't live here. He only happened to be staying here when he died. We wanted him to come here when he retired, but he wouldn't. You see, he never really got on with poor Ernest."

"Your uncle was of a very independent nature, Miss Venner. No doubt he felt that his freedom of action would be restricted if he lived with relatives. I expect he preferred to set up an establishment of his own?"

"He never settled down anywhere, if that's what you mean. He liked living in hotels, he used to say it saved him trouble. Sometimes he would stay in London, and then I saw something of him. But usually he preferred the seaside. He was staying at the Mermaid at Bindon-on-Sea when we heard that he was ill, and went down to fetch him."

"As his favourite niece, you naturally corresponded regularly with him, Miss Venner?"

She scowled at this, and it struck Dr. Priestley that her annoyance was the first genuine emotion she had shown. "I was his only niece," she replied harshly. "We used to get on pretty well together, and he used to take me out whenever he came to London. But for some reason he cooled off and took up Ernest instead. I don't know why, I hadn't done anything to offend him."

For some minutes past she had been glancing impatiently at the jewelled watch upon her wrist. Dr. Priestley seemed very obtuse, but at last he took the hint. He and Oldland rose and took their leave. She almost bustled them out of the room.

"Well, you didn't make much of your opportunity," remarked Oldland, as they got outside. "I don't think you mentioned Venner to her once. And whatever possessed you to let her think that you were a bosom friend of old Hinchliffe?"

"You must allow me my hobbies, Oldland," Dr. Priestley replied. "Now, I expect you're anxious to get on with your round. You can leave me here. I am quite capable of making my own way home."

So Oldland drove off. But Dr. Priestley seemed in no hurry to return to Westbourne Terrace. The not very inspiring architecture of the neighbourhood appeared to interest him. He spent some little time contemplating this, then bought a Sunday paper from a

newsvendor established in a sheltered corner. This he opened, and standing on the pavement near the end of Clewer Street, studied it with deep attention.

His patience was at length rewarded. A taxi turned into Clewer Street, and pulled up at Number 7. A man descended from it, and Dr. Priestley peered at him over the edge of his newspaper. He was elderly, and moved with more than a suggestion of stiffness of the limbs. But none the less, he was smartly, not to say jauntily dressed. And Dr. Priestley noticed that he wore a carnation in his button-hole, and carried a large bunch of flowers.

He disappeared into the house, but Dr. Priestley, seeing that the taxi waited, returned to the perusal of his newspaper. A few minutes later the elderly gentleman reappeared, this time with Christine Venner in his company. They got into the taxi and drove off. Dr. Priestley waited until they were out of sight. Then, hailing a second taxi from a rank nearby, he returned to his house in Westbourne Terrace.

Whatever Oldland might think of his proceedings, he felt that he had not wasted his morning. He had made the acquaintance of Christine Venner, and had picked up various fragments of information which could be pieced together at his leisure. And, more important still, he had an opportunity of judging her feelings regarding the disappearance of her brother.

This was instructive, for it had been obvious that her expressions of concern had been purely formal. They had been framed, in fact, to meet the situation. They were artificial, as artificial as her own complexion. And yet their very lack of colour gave Dr. Priestley food for thought. Did Christine Venner know what had happened to her brother? Or was it that she was merely supremely indifferent to his fate?

In any case, it was clear that she did not propose to

allow his disappearance to interfere with her pleasures. The identity of the elderly man, whom she had so obviously been expecting, excited Dr. Priestley's curiosity. "Willy," she had called him. Dr. Priestley, when he had decided to wait and catch a glimpse of him, had certainly expected to see a younger man. Who was this old beau, with whom she seemed to be on such excellent terms?

A fantastic idea occurred to Dr. Priestley. He took the London directory from its place, and turned over the pages until he came to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He ran through the entries until he came to the name he sought. Here it was, among the occupants of number 200. "Coleforth William V. Solicitor. Commissioner for Oaths."

Dr. Priestley replaced the volume, and sat down at his desk. Was it possible that the solicitor was Christine Venner's admirer? or rather was it likely? In the conversation which he had had with the Inspector, he had spoken of her as a "damned fine girl." He had made no secret of his irritation that Hinchliffe had abandoned his original intention of making her his heiress. On the other hand, there was something incongruous in the idea of an elderly solicitor calling on his late client's niece, and taking her out for a Sunday jaunt. Especially when the lady's brother had recently disappeared in mysterious circumstances.

Still, there might be some sort of understanding between them. That Christine Venner was capable of any action that required resolution or self-reliance, Dr. Priestley did not for an instant believe. But her rôle might be that of a screen to hide the figure of Coleforth pulling strings in the background. Could it be that Coleforth was responsible for her brother's disappearance?

But this was a question that could not yet be answered. Dr. Priestley picked up a pencil and began

to make notes upon a sheet of paper. He headed them "Apparent relations between the persons concerned." The first note was as follows: "Hinchliffe—Ernest Venner. Hinchliffe on his retirement from business, said not to be on too good terms with his nephew. This alleged to be his reason for refusing to settle at the flat in Clewer Street, or, apparently, elsewhere. Later, however, Hinchliffe alters his will in Venner's favour. He apparently raises no objection to being taken to the flat from Bindon-on-Sea."

Dr. Priestley considered this for a moment, and then continued. "Hinchliffe—Christine Venner. Hinchliffe entertains his niece in London, and makes a will in her favour. Later he cancels this will. Why?

"Hinchliffe—Coleforth. Lawyer and client seem at one time to have been on fairly intimate terms. But, when Hinchliffe makes his second will he does not consult Coleforth. Coleforth, by his own statement, never saw his client after that.

"Ernest Venner—Christine Venner. They shared a flat together, apparently for some considerable time. Christine Venner reports her brother's disappearance to the police, but shows no signs of grief at the event.

"Ernest Venner—Coleforth. Coleforth denies acquaintance with Venner previous to his uncle's death. Shows in conversation a marked prejudice against Venner. Denies knowledge of his disappearance when approached by the Inspector.

"Christine Venner—Coleforth. Coleforth expresses admiration for C. V. Hopes that Venner with disappear permanently, and that C. V. will succeed to his money. May be on terms of intimacy with C. V. not yet confirmed. C. V. goes to consult Coleforth immediately after Hinchliffe's death."

As Dr. Priestley read these notes over, a point which had been at the back of his mind for some time took

definite shape. Whether or not Coleforth was "Willy" with whom Christine Venner seemed to be on such good terms, she and the solicitor were in communication with each other. She had applied to him on her uncle's death. Would it not have been natural for her to apply to him a second time when her brother disappeared? If she had done so, why had the solicitor denied knowledge of the disappearance? If she had not, what considerations had restrained her?

Dr. Priestley began to feel that he was building on very insecure foundations. Of the people concerned, Hinchliffe was dead, and Venner had disappeared. Christine Venner, as Oldland had warned him, was thoroughly artificial. She might well be a mouthpiece for statements carefully prepared for her beforehand. Undoubtedly she would break down on cross-examination, if this were the case. But any attempt at cross-examination would put her, and her advisers, if any, on their guard.

Coleforth, in Dr. Priestley's opinion, was no more reliable. His conversation as reported by the Inspector had been surprisingly indiscreet. But this might not have been due to alcoholic exuberance. It might have been deliberately simulated, in order to create a false impression. No reliance could really be placed on anything he had said, until it was confirmed from other sources.

Still, Dr. Priestley felt bound to argue, provisionally at least, from such information as he possessed, one point seemed definitely established. Venner had actually inherited his uncle's fortune. The cheque he had handed to Miss Loveday—and there was no reason to doubt her statement at least—seemed to prove that. Was it true that a will had previously existed in Christine Venner's favour? And, if so, what had occurred to induce Hinchliffe to change his mind?

It seemed to Dr. Priestley that the answer to that question might prove to be the key which he sought. But who was to supply the answer? Both Christine Venner and Coleforth had implied that they did not know the reason. Hinchliffe was dead, and Venner out of reach. It was unlikely that anyone else shared the knowledge.

Dr. Priestley added the notes that he had just made to the Venner dossier. He decided to show them on some future occasion to Faversham and Oldland. It was possible that one or the other of them might discover some hints which he had not himself perceived.

But, at the moment, there were other matters demanding his attention. The dossier must go back into the cabinet.

2

Next morning, without informing anyone of his intentions, Dr. Priestley journeyed eastwards. His destination was Ludgate Hill, and, having reached it, he sought the building bearing the number 212. It proved to be an old-fashioned block of offices, with the names of the various occupants painted on the walls of the entrance. Among those situated on the fifth floor he found the name he sought. "Ernest Venner. Importer."

Not wishing to attract the attention of the liftman, he climbed the stairs laboriously, until at last he reached the top landing. Even then, Ernest Venner's office was not easy to find. He had to traverse a dark passage until he reached a door on which was painted "Ernest Venner. Inquiries." He tapped upon this door, and a voice bade him come in.

Miss Loveday was not apparently very busy. She was sitting in a chair before a small gas fire knitting.

As Dr. Priestley entered, she put her work aside and looked up. His impression was favourable. She looked intelligent and good-natured, with a little diplomacy she might prove a valuable source of information.

"Good-morning," said Dr. Priestley politely. "I wonder if it would be possible for me to see Mr. Venner? My name is Priestley, Dr. Priestley. Mr. Venner may very possibly not be acquainted with it. But if you will tell him that I have come on behalf of Mr. McArdle of Edinburgh, I feel sure that he will see me."

"I am very sorry, Dr. Priestley," replied Miss Loveday, "but Mr. Venner is out of town, and I hardly know when to expect him back."

Dr. Priestley seemed overcome by this announcement. There happened to be a chair facing the one in which Miss Loveday was sitting, and into this he sank abruptly. "Dear me!" he exclaimed. "That is most unfortunate. Could you tell me how long Mr. Venner has been out of London?"

"Since last Wednesday week," she replied, without hesitation. And then, as an afterthought, she added, "His business frequently takes him away from the office."

So Miss Loveday added discretion to her other virtues, thought Dr. Priestley. "Ah! no doubt that explains why Mr. McArdle received no reply to his last letter," he muttered, as though to himself. And then, addressing Miss Loveday, "This is really most awkward. My friend, Mr. McArdle, begged me to call and speak to Mr. Venner. He would have come to London himself, but, as he explained in his letter, he is at present confined to his house in Edinburgh with a broken leg. The result of a motor accident, from which he was lucky to escape with his life. It is really most distressing."

Miss Loveday looked sympathetic, but puzzled. She was evidently not sure whether her visitor referred to

Mr. McArdle's broken leg, or to her employer's absence. Nor did she know quite what to make of this middle-aged gentleman, who looked anything but a business man. He seemed benevolent enough, but his allusions were certainly obscure. "Perhaps you will leave a message which I could give Mr. Venner on his return?" she said at random.

"My dear young lady," exclaimed Dr. Priestley in horror, "I am afraid that would be no good at all. The matter is most urgent. Mr. McArdle was most emphatic that Mr. Venner should telegraph to him to-day, either accepting or refusing his offer."

Watching Miss Loveday intently, he could see in her expression the triumph of curiosity over discretion. "His offer," she repeated. "Perhaps, Dr. Priestley, if you were to explain, I might be able to help."

"But surely, as Mr. Venner's secretary, you will have seen the correspondence?" exclaimed Dr. Priestley in feigned astonishment. And then, as though correcting himself, "Ah, no, perhaps not. It had slipped my memory for the moment that Mr. McArdle told me that he had addressed his letters to Mr. Venner's private address. I believe that he originally got into touch with Mr. Venner through Miss Christine Venner, who is, I am given to understand, a friend of his."

This was a random shot. But it reached its mark. Miss Loveday's ingratiating smile vanished at once. "I am not likely to know any of Miss Venner's friends," she replied frigidly.

So there was no love lost there. So much the better, thought Dr. Priestley. But he gave no sign of having observed anything. "Since you have not seen the correspondence, I had better explain matters. I know only as much as my friend McArdle saw fit to tell me, of course. Briefly, it amounts to this. Mr. McArdle heard, whether or not through Miss Venner I cannot say, that

Mr. Venner desired to dispose of his business. He wrote to him, and several letters passed. Finally he wrote, a few days ago, making a definite offer, to which he received no reply. The nature of this offer he did not disclose to me. He merely asked me to call on Mr. Venner and request him to send his answer immediately."

The only thread upon which this fable hung was Hanslet's report of Miss Loveday's conversation with the Inspector. Venner, according to her, had referred vaguely to the possibility of his giving up the business. But it was clear that Miss Loveday saw no reason to doubt the existence of Mr. McArdle and his offer.

"Mr. Venner told me nothing of this before he went away," she replied. And then, suddenly, she decided to exchange confidence for confidence. This Dr. Priestley seemed a fatherly sort of person, who could be trusted with the truth. "You see, it's like this," she continued abruptly, "I don't know where Mr. Venner is, or what he is doing. In fact, I'm terribly afraid that something must have happened to him. He left home last Wednesday week, and since then I haven't heard a word from him."

Dr. Priestley gazed at her in mock consternation. "But this is most disconcerting!" he exclaimed. "I really do not know what Mr. McArdle will say when he hears of it. But, wait a minute, now! It struck me that the name Venner was vaguely familiar to me, when I read my friend's letter. It was on the wireless, I recollect it distinctly now. 'Mr. Ernest Venner, wearing a dark suit and a bowler hat.' I cannot recall the rest of the description at the moment. Surely that cannot have been your employer?"

"I am afraid it was," replied Miss Loveday. "He left here rather earlier than usual, last Wednesday week, telling me that he had to leave London. There was

nothing unusual in that, for he often called personally on his customers in the provinces. But he had always told me before where he was going. And I had thought for a long time that he was upset about something."

"Dear me! This is very serious!" Dr. Priestley exclaimed. "I am sure that McArdle would wish me to leave no stone unturned to discover Mr. Venner's whereabouts. Perhaps, if I were to call on Miss Venner, she would be able to give me some information?"

Miss Loveday shook her head. "I'm afraid that wouldn't be any good," she replied. "It was Miss Venner who informed the police of her brother's disappearance. And I know that Mr. Venner never told her anything about his business."

"But surely a brother and sister, living together, would be to some extent in one another's confidence?" Dr. Priestley objected.

She looked at him speculatively. His appearance must have reassured her, for she asked abruptly: "Do you think that your friend Mr. McArdle would really help to try to find Mr. Venner?"

"Mr. McArdle, as I have explained, is at present quite helpless. He will not be able to leave his bed for some considerable time. But I know from his letter that he has this matter deeply at heart, and I am sure that he will authorise me to take such steps as I consider necessary. But, before I did so, I should have to know all the facts."

"Well, I can tell you one thing, Dr. Priestley. Mr. Venner and his sister never got on, although they lived together. They never saw one another more than they could help. And I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Miss Venner knew more about what's happened to him than anyone else."

Dr. Priestley let this contradictory statement pass. He could guess what was in her mind, but he was not

anxious to press the point at present. "You think it strange that you should have heard nothing from Mr. Venner during the last twelve days?" he asked.

"Strange!" she exclaimed. "It's extraordinary. That's why I feel sure that something must have happened to him. Always, when he has been away before, he has written to me every day, telling me what orders he has got, and that sort of thing."

"You told me just now that you fancied he was worried about something. Do you think that can have anything to do with his silence?"

"I don't know. I have wondered about that myself, but I don't see how it could have. He wasn't nearly so worried as he had been during the few days before he went away. I could scarcely understand that, because everything was all right by then."

"Prior to that, he had had some cause for worry?"

"Lots," she replied emphatically. "You see, his business is importing fancy goods from abroad. Bead necklaces from Jab-lonec in Czechoslovakia, for instance. And during the last year the import duties have made things very difficult. Things got so bad that at one time it looked like a smash. Mr. Venner had given a bill to a firm of manufacturers, which matures at the end of this month, and he did not see how he could possibly meet it.

"He always talked to me quite freely about his affairs, and I knew that he had a rich uncle, a Mr. Hinchliffe. I suggested that he should apply to him, but he wouldn't hear of it. He told me that his uncle had only recently made a will in his favour, and that if he asked him for money he would alter it at once. Mr. Hinchliffe was one of those people who hated anybody who failed.

"One day, when things looked desperate, Mr. Venner said to me, 'Only a miracle could save us, and that would be that something should happen to Uncle

Denis.' From what he had told me of Mr. Hinchliffe, who was not an old man and was perfectly healthy, I hadn't much hopes of the miracle. But it did happen after all, for Mr. Hinchliffe died rather suddenly, early in September."

"I believe I remember reading about his death in the papers," Dr. Priestley remarked. "He died of tetanus, did he not?"

"Yes, that was it. There was a lot of fuss about the inquest, and Mr. Venner had to give evidence. He must have been very fond of his uncle, or perhaps he wished he had never said that about the miracle. For instead of being relieved about being able to meet the bill, he seemed to me to be more upset than ever. He got in such a state that I begged him to see a doctor, and he promised me he would. Next day he told me that the doctor had ordered him a tonic, but did not seem to think there was much the matter with him.

"I think now that perhaps he was worried because he was afraid he wouldn't actually get the money in time. He told me that sometimes it takes a long time before an estate can be wound up and everything settled. But he did get it in plenty of time after all. Everything was finally settled on the thirteenth of this month, and he gave me a cheque that day for five thousand pounds to pay into the bank. It was on his private account at the London and Kensington, and I paid it into the business account. And after that Mr. Venner seemed quite his old self."

"Is it not possible that, once Mr. Venner knew that his worries were over, he decided to take a holiday? He might have wanted to go right away, without telling anybody where he was going, in order to ensure a complete rest."

Miss Loveday shook her head. "I am sure that Mr. Venner would have told me if he had been going to take

a few days' holiday," she replied. "Besides, Miss Venner said that he had taken no luggage with him. That's what made me wonder what's happened to him. It seemed very funny that if he meant to be away for more than a night he hadn't taken at least a suit-case with him."

So this point had arisen at last. Dr. Priestley had wondered from the first whether Venner had taken a suit-case with him or not. But he had purposely refrained from asking the question, for fear of suggesting the answer. His difficulty was that it was impossible to verify the majority of the statements made to him. He felt like a man climbing a strange ladder in the dark, uncertain whether the next rung on which he put his foot would give way beneath him or not.

"You see, Mr. Venner had told me that I might not see him again for a few days," Miss Loveday continued. "So I never thought of anything being the matter until Miss Venner rang up on Thursday afternoon. I answered the 'phone, as I always do, and she said: 'This is Miss Venner, I want to speak to my brother.' She always speaks to me like that. She doesn't like me for some reason. I don't know why, I've hardly ever seen her.

"I told her that Mr. Venner was not in the office. 'Where is he, then?' she asked. I told her what he had said to me about not being back for a few days. 'I think he has gone away on business for a few days,' I said. 'That's nonsense,' she answered, in a snappy sort of way. 'He left here yesterday evening, telling me he wouldn't be back till late. He didn't even take a bag with him.' And then she rang off.

"I couldn't make it out at all. I could only think that he had gone to dinner somewhere, and had been persuaded to stay the night. But even then, it was odd that he hadn't gone home or been to the office before then. I didn't hear any more that day. But on Friday

morning a nasty old man called. I oughtn't to say that, I suppose, but he was a nasty old man. The sort that's always trying to put an arm round you. And his breath smelled horribly of whisky.

"He told me that his name was Coleforth, and that he was Miss Venner's lawyer. He insisted that I knew where Mr. Venner was, and I couldn't make him believe that I didn't. And he wanted to poke round Mr. Venner's room, but I wouldn't let him. At last he got quite angry, and told me that I should find myself in trouble with the police if I wasn't careful. But I wasn't a bit afraid of the police, and I told him so.

"He went away at last, telling me that he would see that I lost my job for what he called my impertinence. I told him that the only person who could sack me was Mr. Venner, and that we would see what he said when he came back. As a matter of fact, I've got another job I can go to at any time. Mr. Venner suggested I should look out for one, as he thought it might be necessary for him to give up the business. I couldn't understand at the time what he meant by that. But now I see that he was thinking of his negotiations with your friend Mr. McArdle.

"Next day a police inspector did come round, but he was very nice, not a bit like that nasty old lawyer. He asked me a lot of questions, and I told him everything I knew, just as I've told you. But you do think I was right not to let Mr. Coleforth interefere, don't you, Dr. Priestley?"

"Perfectly right," replied Dr. Priestley. "But, all the same, the position is very curious. This business belongs entirely to Mr. Venner, I suppose? He has no partner or associate of any kind?"

"Nobody else has anything to do with it whatever. Not even Miss Venner. Mr. Venner came into some money when his father died, and started the business

with that. I know for certain that nobody else has any share in it. Mr. Venner has always left me to carry on while he was away. I'm quite used to that. I am authorised to draw cheques for my salary, petty cash, and all that. And I mean to hang on until I hear something from Mr. Venner."

"But if, as you have suggested, anything has happened to Mr. Venner?" Dr. Priestley suggested.

"Then I don't quite know what would happen. His heirs would take over, wouldn't they? And if it turned out to be Miss Venner, I should clear out at once and let her get on with it. I shouldn't wait to give her the pleasure of sacking me."

"Mr. McArdle will naturally be anxious to know who are Mr. Venner's heirs. You see, if anything has happened to Mr. Venner, Mr. McArdle will have to renew his offer to his heirs. Can you give me any information on that point?"

"I can't, I'm afraid, Dr. Priestley. I've been wondering myself. I'm quite sure that Mr. Venner never made a will. He once told me that he hadn't, as he didn't know who to leave his business to. He said it was no use leaving it to his sister, as she had never taken the slightest interest in it. That wasn't long before his uncle died, and I know that he has been too worried to think of making a will since. Besides, if he had, I should have known about it. I know all about his private affairs."

"Then if anything has happened to Mr. Venner, everything will go to his sister," said Dr. Priestley.

"That's what I thought," Miss Loveday replied significantly. "All Mr. Hinchliffe's money, as well as the business."

Dr. Priestley thought it wise to give the conversation a fresh turn. "I am going to ask you to be quite candid with me," he said. "You probably knew Mr.

Venner better than anyone else. You must have thought of some reason to account for his disappearance?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I've racked my brains all this time and I simply cannot understand it. If it had happened a few days before, I might have thought that he had gone away somewhere and committed suicide. He had had a bit of trouble, you know, first over money and then over his uncle's death. For a few weeks before he went away he was in a terrible state, and I shouldn't have been surprised at anything he had done. But as soon as he actually got the money, he seemed to have put his troubles behind him, and was just like his old self, and you'll never make me believe that he had made up his mind to kill himself when he left here that Wednesday evening."

"He might, of course, have met with an accident after he left the office," Dr. Priestley suggested.

"But then, if anything like that had happened to him, for instance, if he's been run over, they'd have looked in his pockets, wouldn't they? And then they'd have found out who he was, for he always carried some of his business cards in his note-case. I know he had them when he left here, for he took his note-case out of his pocket just before he left, and I saw them. And he didn't change his clothes before he left the flat, for when he left here he was wearing the clothes mentioned in the police description. And yet I know that something must have happened to him. If he had been all right he would have written to me before now."

A pause followed. Miss Loveday seemed on the point of adding something, but she thought better of it, and kept silent. Dr. Priestley could read her unspoken thoughts. She too had wondered whether Christine Venner was in some way responsible for her brother's mysterious disappearance. But that she could have murdered him, or connived at his murder, and kept the

body concealed all this time, seemed utterly incredible.

Remained the two theories, propounded by Faversham and Oldland respectively. "Do you think it possible that Mr. Venner, after he left the flat, was attacked by a sudden loss of memory?" Dr. Priestley asked.

Again she shook her head. "I've thought of that. One does see cases like that in the papers. But for one thing he'd only have to look in his note-case to find out who he was. And, for another, there was nothing the matter with his memory when he left here. He had been going through some of the past details of the business with me, and he remembered all sorts of things that I didn't. And he wouldn't suddenly have forgotten all that, surely?"

Dr. Priestley was bound to agree that such sudden loss of memory was unlikely. And he had no wish to broach Faversham's theory, for he had seen enough of Miss Loveday by now to guess what her objection would be. "Oh, he wouldn't have done that!" And this Dr. Priestley believed to be no objection at all. He held that it was impossible to forecast the effect upon any man of hitherto unexperienced circumstances, or to guess to what action they might impel him.

"There remains only one question for me to ask on behalf of my friend Mr. McArdle," he said. "You tell me that Mr. Venner has no associate in the business. But surely he employed a solicitor, who would be empowered to take charge of his affairs in any eventuality?"

"Mr. Venner would never have anything to do with solicitors," she replied. "He was always afraid of their interfering, or professing to know more about the business than he did himself. I believe that's one reason why he never made a will. He hated discussing his affairs with a stranger."

Dr. Priestley began to make preparations for his

departure. "I'm afraid that the only course open to Mr. McArdle is to wait patiently," he said. "I am quite sure that he would wish me to keep in touch with you. May I ask you to communicate with me at once should you receive any news of Mr. Venner?"

She agreed to this readily enough. Dr. Priestley seemed a dependable sort of person, and it was a relief to her to feel that she could consult him in any case of emergency. He wrote out his address and telephone number for her and left the office, assuring her of his readiness to help should any difficulty arise.

3

On the Wednesday evening of that week, a fortnight after Venner's disappearance, Oldland again dined with Dr. Priestley. And in the study after dinner, the conversation veered to the subject of the visit they had paid to Clewer Street.

It was Oldland who started it. "You're a queer bloke, Priestley," he said, apropos of nothing in particular. "I had no idea, until the time of poor Claverton's death, that you took the slightest interest in purely human problems. I fancied, from what I had heard of you in recent years, that your brain moved wholly in the regions of space—time, whatever that may be exactly. And now I find that you display a most unexpected curiosity as to the affairs of complete strangers."

Had anybody but Oldland made such a remark, Dr. Priestley would have been seriously annoyed. But Oldland, as an old friend, was privileged, and he only smiled. "You happen to have seen me indulging in my hobby," he replied. "I would ask you to believe, however, that I do not allow it to interfere with my more serious scientific work."

" I know, I know," said Oldland thoughtfully. " But I've noticed that you put as much hard thinking into your hobby as into your work. And it isn't always obvious to the ordinary mortal what you're driving at. I don't want to seem inquisitive, but I would like to know what pleasure you get out of trying to follow up this Venner business?"

" The pleasure a man of my temperament finds in any problems which appear difficult of solution," replied Dr. Priestley quietly.

" Oh, I quite understand that!" Oldland exclaimed, with a touch of impatience. " I remember, in the old days, a problem would always set you off in full cry, like a pack of hounds on a hot scent. But why, of all the problems that this world presents, have you frozen on to this Venner business? I can see no possible attraction, either in the Venners themselves, who are utterly commonplace, or in the man's disappearance. Either he will turn up again in due course, as I firmly believe, or you'll hear no more of him. And whichever happens, I don't see that it matters a fig to anybody."

Dr. Priestley drew his chair nearer to the fire. The evening was cold, and the weather forecast predicted snow. In Dr. Priestley's study it was warm enough, but he poked the fire into a cheerful blaze. " I should not be surprised if Faversham looked in this evening," he said. " I told him that you were coming, and he promised to come round later in the evening if he could. He likes to see a bright fire. You asked me why I am interested in this man Venner's disappearance? Well, to be perfectly candid with you, Oldland, I hardly yet know myself."

He put down the poker, and leant back in his chair. " I might point out the fundamental difference in our outlooks," he continued. " To you Venner and his sister appeal, or do not appeal, as personalities. You

regard them, I fancy, as human beings of no great force of character, and consequently possessing little attraction or interest. To me, they are merely as X and Y, two factors in an equation of considerable complexity."

"I don't see the complexity," Oldland persisted stubbornly. "And, in any case, I don't see how your visit to Clewer Street on Sunday can possibly have helped you to solve your equation."

"The complexity may be apparent rather than real," replied Dr. Priestley. "At present, I am merely endeavouring to arrange the terms of the equation. These may cancel out, giving a perfectly simple result. Venner may come back, with a satisfactory reason for his absence. But, if he does not, I believe that the complications involved will require considerable patience to unravel. And that is the sole reason for my interest in the matter. At present, I admit, I am merely groping in the dark, and I am quite ready to admit that I may be disappointed. I use the word purely in the intellectual sense, of course."

"Meaning that you'll only be thrilled if you come upon a nice juicy murder, or something like that?" Oldland suggested.

"You put the matter rather crudely, Oldland," replied Dr. Priestley severely. "Murder is no subject for jest, especially from the point of view of the victim. But you will admit that the possibility exists that Venner is no longer alive."

"Sorry," exclaimed Oldland contritely. "I didn't really mean to be flippant. But, if Venner is dead, what's become of his body? He's been missing for a fortnight to-day, you know."

"That is the principal difficulty in forming a theory of his death," Dr. Priestley replied. "But I am not yet prepared to formulate any such theory. I am not in a position to do so. I have first to consider the terms of

the equation, and decide upon their relative value. And my visit with you to Clewer Street on Sunday concerned that valuation."

Oldland allowed himself a slight shrug of the shoulders. "You're getting a bit out of my depth, Priestley," he remarked.

"Then let us drop the mathematical analogy. I adopted it merely to help you to understand my point of view. By the terms of the equation, I meant to indicate the persons who may be considered as concerned in Venner's disappearance.

"Who are these persons? First and foremost his uncle, Mr. Hinchliffe. I think it is apparent that Mr. Hinchliffe's death and Venner's disappearance are in some way connected. Hinchliffe's death completely altered Venner's circumstances. If Hinchliffe had not died, Venner might have run away to escape his creditors. But he would not have disappeared in the curious circumstances which actually existed. But Hinchliffe is dead. We cannot secure his testimony, and we cannot ascertain directly the relations which existed between him and his nephew."

"Maybe you're right," said Oldland doubtfully "But Hinchliffe died two months and more before Venner vanished."

"Possibly. But Venner vanished only two days after he actually obtained possession of his uncle's fortune. But we may leave Hinchliffe for the moment. The second person concerned—I use the word in its widest possible sense—is Miss Venner, for she is believed to be the last person of Venner's acquaintance to see him. What value would you put upon her as a witness?"

"You mean, how far would I accept what she said as gospel? Only as far as it suited her interest to tell the truth. As I told you, before ever you saw her, the woman is artificial, inside and out. There's only this

in her favour. I shouldn't think she had enough brains or determination to invent a good lie and stick to it."

"Possibly not. But suppose she had an adviser in the background who was capable of inventing lies for her as required?"

"Then I think that she would make a very good mouthpiece. You heard the way she spoke of poor dear Ernest, the other morning. If that wasn't a piece of sheer insincerity, I'm a Dutchman. But who is this adviser you're hinting at?"

"The third person concerned. You have heard him referred to as Willy. And I believe I have discovered his identity."

"Well, I'm damned!" Oldland exclaimed. "So that's why you wouldn't come in the car with me on Sunday morning, was it? You hung around till the eagerly expected Willy turned up and had a look at him. Some infatuated youth, I suppose?"

Dr. Priestley smiled. "On the contrary, he seemed to me to be a man of advanced years. I was not near enough to perceive his features distinctly, but he had a certain characteristic stiffness in his walk. He brought flowers for Miss Venner, and subsequently took her away in a taxi."

"So the fair Christine indulges in elderly admirers, does she?" said Oldland. "Well, perhaps she's wise. They may or may not be safer, but they usually have more money to spend. But what reason is there to suppose that this amorous old gentleman plays the part of a sinister adviser?"

"Let me explain further. On Monday between one o'clock and a quarter past, I happened to be strolling through Lincoln's Inn Fields. While doing so, I saw a man of similar appearance and with a similar characteristic walk emerge from the building numbered 200. After he had turned the corner, I asked the porter who

he was, and was told that he was Mr. William Coleforth. Now this Mr. William Coleforth happens to have been Mr. Hinchliffe's solicitor."

"Then surely our little romance is shattered," said Oldland. "Nor do I see quite why you should regard Coleforth as a sinister influence. It seems to me the most natural thing in the world that her late uncle's solicitor should call on Miss Venner. Though I'm bound to admit that to call on Sunday morning, and bring flowers, are unusual features of a solicitor's visit. She'll have to pay for them. He'll work the flowers into his bill somehow, I'll be bound."

"I might have taken the same view, had I not other information concerning Mr. Coleforth. I have the best of reasons for believing that he deliberately misled the police when he was interviewed on the subject of Venner's disappearance. He said then that he knew nothing about it. And yet I am told, on very good authority, that he visited Venner's office, and questioned his secretary on that very subject the day before the police called upon him."

"That certainly looks a bit fishy," Oldland said thoughtfully. "What's in your mind, Priestley? That Christine Venner and this solicitor chap between them engineered Venner's disappearance in some way?"

"I am endeavouring to keep my mind open until I obtain further evidence. The point I wish to make at the moment is this. If Coleforth lied regarding his knowledge of fact, I cannot place any reliance upon his subsequent statements. Now let us pass to the third person concerned, Venner's secretary, Miss Loveday, a girl of more than average intelligence."

Oldland laughed. "That's high praise from you, Priestley. Enter Miss Loveday. What's she got to say for herself?"

"She was good enough to give me several useful

particulars about Venner and his habits. And I am inclined to think that her evidence is reliable. In fact, I am inclined to believe her statement that Venner left his office on the afternoon of Wednesday the fifteenth, rather earlier than usual, and to accept nothing else that I have heard as definite evidence."

"But if you are going to be so sceptical, can you believe even that?" Oldland asked.

"I can believe nothing implicitly, for there is no check upon any of these people's statements. The only occupant of Venner's office besides himself was Miss Loveday. It is, therefore, impossible to confirm her statement as to his leaving the office on the fifteenth. He may have been seen doing so by other occupants of the building. But as Venner would be familiar to them, the fact of seeing him on that particular date would make no impression on them. If questioned now, after a fortnight's interval, they would not be able to state with any certainty when they last saw him.

"The same reasoning applies to the flat in Clewer Street, but with rather more force, because it is quite possible to enter or leave it without being observed. No resident servant appears to be kept. Miss Venner's statement, therefore, can no more be checked than Miss Loveday's. But, if I must choose between the two, I prefer the latter."

"But look here, Priestley," said Oldland, "haven't you let your imagination run away with you a bit? Why this atmosphere of suspicion? I'll admit that I wouldn't put much faith in anything Christine Venner said. But why should she go to the police and report her brother's disappearance, if she meant to make a false statement? My own opinion was that she was telling the truth, and that Venner wandered away under the influence of some temporary mental trouble. After all, what is there against that theory?"

" Nothing definite," Dr. Priestley replied. " But the surest road to failure in any mathematical problem is to start with some preconceived idea of the solution, and then to arrange the terms so that they produce that solution. In my experience, the analogy holds perfectly in human affairs. I do not reject your theory, by any means, but at present I am bound to keep my mind open to all possible theories.

" At present, I am particularly interested in the relations between Coleforth and Miss Venner. I have reason to believe, I will not put it more strongly than that, that she is in the habit of consulting him in emergency. He certainly appears to be on more intimate terms with her than usually exist between solicitor and client. He spoke of her in terms of admiration to the Inspector who interviewed him. He also appeared to resent the fact that Hinchliffe left his money to Ernest Venner rather than to her. That the terms of Hinchliffe's will have been correctly reported, there is no doubt. I sent Merefield to Somerset House to verify them. The will is dated May 5th of this year, and by it Hinchliffe revoked all previous wills and codicils, and bequeathed all he possessed to his nephew, Ernest Venner."

" Well, that sounds all shipshape, and Bristol fashion," Oldland remarked. " Where's the snag?"

" Not in the will itself, certainly. Possibly in Hinchliffe's motive for revoking his previous will, if such existed. The balance of probability appears to be that Venner had not made a will when he disappeared."

" That's quite likely. Making a will is a positive action, and as I've told you a dozen times, Venner is—or was, if you prefer it—completely negative. But what if he didn't make a will?"

" Then, if he died intestate, Miss Venner would inherit her uncle's fortune at second-hand," Dr. Priest-

ley replied. "I am not making an accusation. I am merely examining motive."

Oldland shook his head. "You'll never persuade me that Christine Venner is a murderess," he said. "She may not have got on with her brother, but, to put it vulgarly, she hasn't got the guts to kill him."

"I warned you that I was not making an accusation. Nor is there any reason to impute the sole motive to Miss Venner. Let us try to view events from Coleforth's point of view.

"Coleforth, if one may judge from the appearance of his office, as reported by the Inspector, is not in very affluent circumstances. He seems to have expensive tastes. He had a wealthy client in Mr. Hinchliffe. Hinchliffe had a niece, whom he had made his heiress. Miss Venner, as we know, is sufficiently intimate with Coleforth to call him 'Willy.'"

Oldland burst out laughing. "The bouquet and the little outing together on Sunday," he exclaimed. "By jove, I shouldn't wonder if you'd hit the nail on the head, Priestley. Coleforth makes up his mind to marry the fair Christine, eh? Why, man, he might just as well marry one of Madame Tussaud's wax figures! But there's the fortune, of course."

"That is my point," said Dr. Priestley tranquilly. "All this is purely conjecture, of course. But I maintain that it is within the bounds of possibility that Coleforth determined to marry Miss Venner, at the time when she was still her uncle's heiress.

"But for some reason, and as recently as last May, Hinchliffe alters his will. Whether or not Coleforth continued his attentions to Miss Venner after that date, we do not know. Then Hinchliffe dies, and the position is once more altered. Ernest Venner comes into the fortune. If he has not made a will, Miss Venner, as his next of kin, succeeds him."

"At last I see what you were getting at when you suggested that Christine Venner might have a sinister adviser in the background!" Oldland exclaimed. "You mean that Coleforth may have made away with Venner, and put his sister up to spinning that yarn about his disappearance. How do you suppose he did it? Was he lying in wait for Venner at the flat on the 15th?"

"I do not suppose that he did it," Dr. Priestley replied. "I only envisage the possibility. He may be conceived to have had a motive, but his opportunity is another matter.

"There is a curious inconsistency in Venner's statement before he disappeared, as reported by two witnesses. Miss Loveday says that he told her that he was going out of London, and might not see her for a few days. Miss Venner says that he told her that he was going out, and would not be back till late. She also says that when he left the flat, he took no luggage with him. These two statements seem to some extent to be contradictory, which is one reason why I am not inclined to place too much reliance on Miss Venner's account of what her brother said to her."

Oldland replenished his glass. "Groping in the dark, you said!" he muttered. "This is groping in the dark with a vengeance. There doesn't seem to be a single fact that one can lay hold of, knowing it to be a fact. But, look here, Priestley, I think I see a way in which your two statements could be reconciled, without putting Coleforth out of the picture. Am I permitted a comment?"

Dr. Priestley smiled. "Your comments are almost invariably shrewd," he replied.

"Thanks for the compliment. I'm going to abandon my own theory for the moment, and adopt yours. Venner finds it necessary to leave London, for business

reasons, if you like. He also has an appointment with Coleforth, in London or somewhere within easy reach, for the evening of the 15th. He decides to keep that appointment, come back to the flat to sleep and start on his business journey on the morning of the sixteenth.

"Now, if that were the case, both statements are quite rational. He would tell his secretary that he was going out of London and would not see her for a few days, because he would not be coming back to the office before he started on his journey. He would tell his sister that he was going out and would not be back until late, because he meant to sleep at the flat that night. Nor, when he left the flat on the evening of the fifteenth, would he need to take any luggage with him."

"That is a most plausible suggestion, Oldland!" Dr. Priestley exclaimed approvingly. "I confess that it had not occurred to me. But it hardly decreases my difficulties. What was Venner's destination when he left the flat? So far nobody has come forward and admitted having seen him, although his description has been broadcast."

"Description! Much good that is. Do you look at everybody you happen to pass in the street in case they conform with a description you may have heard on the wireless? I don't. Besides, if Coleforth chose his rendezvous properly, nobody would have seen him."

"Then we have no clue to Venner's movements after he left the flat. He may have met Coleforth, and his death may have resulted from that meeting. But there are two grave objections to such a theory. The first is physical. Coleforth is an old man, and from my observation of him, not very active."

"It doesn't need any very great physical agility to shoot a man or poison him," Oldland suggested. "I don't think that need worry you. What's the second objection?"

"The disposal of the body," Dr. Priestley replied, "and that objection seems to me almost insuperable."

"Yes, that's the very devil," said Oldland thoughtfully. "Bodies are confoundedly awkward things, there's no getting away from that. They have an inconvenient habit of decomposing, and so revealing their presence, and they're very awkward things to carry about. I don't see how a man like Coleforth could deal with a body single-handed."

"And yet nearly all murders are of necessity single-handed. The danger of employing a confederate, even if one can be found, is too great. It might be agreed that in this case Coleforth had a confederate ready to hand in Miss Venner. Her brother's death would benefit her even more than it would Coleforth. But I do not think that Coleforth, however greatly attached to her he may be, would trust her with such a secret."

"Then you don't think that she is in the plot?" Oldland asked.

"I am not sure. Your ingenious explanation of the two statements makes it appear possible that she told the truth, as she knew it, to the police. When her brother did not return, and she learnt that he was not at his office, she communicated with Coleforth. I feel pretty certain of that, from Coleforth's visit to Miss Loveday. Coleforth advised her to communicate with the police at once, knowing that if she did not do so, Miss Loveday would take some similar action.

"When making his appointment with Venner, Coleforth had probably said that he wished to see him upon a very confidential matter, and that for the present their meeting had better not be mentioned. Subsequently, his chief anxiety would be whether Venner had mentioned the appointment to anybody. As soon as he

learnt that Venner had said nothing to his sister or to Miss Loveday, his mind would be at rest."

Oldland nodded. "And there's this about it," he remarked. "If Venner did actually make a will, and it is either at the flat or at his office, Coleforth will get hold of it, sooner or later. If the will is in favour of the fair Christine, well and good. If it isn't it will find its way quietly into the fire. And so in due course, unless you can prove your theory, Coleforth will obtain possession of both Christine and the money."

"I have not definitely adopted the theory of Coleforth's guilt," Dr. Priestley replied. "There are no more facts in favour of it than there are in favour of your theory of mental aberration, or Faversham's of deliberate self-effacement. I merely wish to consider all the possibilities, and one of them is that Venner is dead. Since his body has not been found, it seems difficult to imagine his death as due to accident or suicide. If it had been due to murder, it is necessary to suggest a murderer. Coleforth seems a possible candidate for that rôle. I go no further than that."

Oldland slowly finished his drink. "Have you said anything to our friend Superintendent Hanslet about this?" he asked.

"About my suspicions of Coleforth? Not yet. I may do so if I am able to collect more evidence. But mere suspicion, on no firmer grounds than conjecture, would not appeal to the Superintendent. Nor does it appeal to me. I should require definite facts before I should be justified in advancing any theory to the police."

"Well, I wish you joy of your problem, Priestley," said Oldland. "It looks to me pretty hopeless, I must confess. Hallo, time's getting on. It's past eleven already. Faversham is hardly likely to come now, is he?"

"I should not expect him as late as this," Dr.

Priestley replied. "No doubt something has occurred to prevent him."

"Shouldn't wonder. He's a busy man. I expect he's enjoying himself, analysing the contents of some poor devil's inside. I think I'll be getting along. I have got to make a couple of visits to-night, before I turn in."

Dr. Priestley accompanied Oldland to the front door. A bitterly cold wind was blowing from the east, and a few flakes of snow were falling. As he returned to the study, Dr. Priestley could not blame Faversham for staying at home, even if his duties had allowed him leisure.

His chat with Oldland had concentrated his mind afresh upon the Venner case. He took out the dossier, and absently turned over the scraps of paper which it contained. He felt that somewhere among them must be hidden the clue which would lead to the solution of the problem.

But where? There were so many points, all more or less irrelevant, which had not been satisfactorily settled. The notes which Merefield had made of Hinchliffe's will caught his eye. Here, for instance, was one of those points. What was the reason which induced Hinchliffe to alter his will so drastically, assuming that a will in favour of Christine Venner had formerly existed?

Merefield had noted the names and addresses of the witnesses. "Theodore Millington, The Mermaid Hotel, Bindon-on-Sea," and "Gladys Quentin, 10 Cliffe Terrace, Bindon-on-Sea." Hinchliffe had clearly been staying at the Mermaid when he made his will. Perhaps a visit to Bindon-on-Sea, an easy journey by train from London, would not be unprofitable.

And there was another point, so nebulous that it was difficult to put it into convincing words. On the previous Sunday, while Dr. Priestley was waiting in the neigh-

bourhood of Clewer Street, he had seen a chemist's shop at the corner, only a few doors from the Venners' flat. He had even noticed the name over the door, W. Pepper. According to Oldland, Venner had bought something from the chemist, with which to relieve his uncle's influenza. The chemist in question was probably Mr. Pepper. But what was that something?

Dr. Priestley picked up his fountain pen and wrote a carefully worded note to Superintendent Hanslet.

4

Dr. Priestley decided to spend that week-end at Bindon-on-Sea, and to take his secretary with him. Merefield was instructed to write for rooms to the Mermaid Hotel, and in due course a letter came back, signed "Theodore Millington, Proprietor," to the effect that he would have great pleasure in reserving the accommodation required.

It was Saturday afternoon when Dr. Priestley arrived at the Mermaid. It was a very unpretentious little place, but it breathed an air of comfort. Evidently Mr. Hinchliffe's taste had not led him astray. Also, since it was by now December 2nd, and the season at Bindon-on-Sea was long over, there were not more than halt a dozen guests staying in the place.

Dr. Priestley and Merefield sedulously cultivated Mr. Millington from the first. He was a dapper little man, and not easy to engage in lengthy conversation, since he seemed in a perpetual hurry. Merefield, however, by dint of perseverance, wormed himself into his good graces.

"I've persuaded mine host to give us half an hour of his valuable time, sir," he reported during dinner on Sunday evening. "It wasn't altogether an easy

job, he pretends he's one of those chaps who never have a moment to sit down. But he's promised to come and have a drink with us in the lounge after ten o'clock."

"Capital, my boy!" replied Dr. Priestley approvingly. "You will be careful to order what he likes best?"

"That's easy, sir, old brandy. I've watched him long enough for that. And, by the way, Gladys Quentin is the book-keeper. That dark girl you may have seen in the office, sir."

Dr. Priestley nodded, apparently well pleased. And when Mr. Millington, faithful to his promise, came up to them as they sat in the corner of the lounge, he was affability itself. "I am very glad of the opportunity of making your acquaintance, Mr. Millington," he said. "Harold, my boy, would you oblige me by touching the bell? I find myself extremely comfortable here, Mr. Millington. But then, since Mr. Hinchliffe stayed here for so long, I should have expected nothing else."

An inquisitive gleam appeared in the proprietor's eye. "I am very glad that we have managed to make you comfortable, sir," he replied. "Do I understand that you were acquainted with Mr. Hinchliffe?"

"Hardly acquainted," said Dr. Priestley. "I never actually met Mr. Hinchliffe himself. But we have mutual friends. I was speaking to his niece, Miss Venner, as recently as last week."

"Miss Venner? Yes, sir, I've seen her. Once only though. It was usually her brother, Mr. Ernest Venner, who used to come down to see Mr. Hinchliffe."

"Ah, Mr. Ernest Venner. I had not the pleasure of knowing him. You have heard, of course, of his remarkable disappearance, Mr. Millington?"

"Yes, I read of it in the papers," Mr. Millington replied curtly. He picked up the glass which had been

set before him. "You very good health, gentlemen," he added.

"And yours, Mr. Millington," said Dr. Priestley. "A very sad thing about Mr. Venner. His doctor, who happens to be a friend of mine, believes that he must be suffering from temporary loss of memory."

"Loss of memory!" exclaimed the proprietor incredulously. Then, recollecting himself. "I beg your pardon, sir. The doctor should know, of course. But it sounds very queer to me. Very queer indeed."

"Not having seen Mr. Venner, I can hardly judge for myself," said Dr. Priestley negligently. "You knew him fairly well, perhaps?"

"I can't say I knew him well, sir. I've only seen him two or three times in my life, while Mr. Hinchliffe was staying here. But I can't help wondering. You see, sir, Mr. Hinchliffe used to talk to me a good bit in the evenings. Usually it was in this very corner of the lounge, where we're sitting now. I think he used to find it a bit lonely at times, being by himself, and liked to have somebody to exchange a word or two with, now and then."

"Mr. Hinchliffe's conversation must have been interesting," Dr. Priestley observed. "His occupation must have given him the opportunity of seeing life from a peculiar angle."

Mr. Millington glanced at his guest, as though not quite sure of the sense in which this remark was to be taken. "He'd seen life, all right, sir," he replied. "Some of his stories wouldn't bear repeating. I was always afraid that somebody might come in and overhear them. A very pleasant gentleman, was Mr. Hinchliffe, when he cared to be. But a bit of a rough diamond, sir, if I may say so. He had his likes and dislikes, and if he didn't like anybody or anything, he'd say so, and there was no mistaking his meaning."

"A man who knew his own mind. But he must have had an affectionate side to his nature. I have always understood that he was very fond of his nephew and niece."

"Some folks have queer ways of showing their affection," replied Mr. Millington with something like a solemn wink. "He didn't behave a bit like the loving uncle when Mr. Venner came down here to see him the first time, anyhow. That must have been about the beginning of May, for Mr. Hinchliffe came here first at the end of April, and he hadn't been here more than a week.

"Mr. Venner drove up in a car one evening. I happened to be in the office, relieving Miss Quentin, who was having her tea at the time. Mr. Venner came up to me and asked if Mr. Hinchliffe was in. Of course, I didn't know who Mr. Venner was at the time. It was Mr. Hinchliffe who told me afterwards. He asked me if Mr. Hinchliffe was in, and I brought him in here. Mr. Hinchliffe was sitting in the very chair you're sitting in now, having one of his favourite cocktails. A mixture of his own, it was. Rum and creme de menthe. He'd drink them by the dozen, all hours of the day."

"A very curious taste," commented Dr. Priestley. "For myself, I prefer this excellent brandy of yours. May I trouble you to ring the bell again, please, Harold?"

"A very queer taste indeed, sir. Well, as I was saying, I brought Mr. Venner in here, and Mr. Hinchliffe looked up as we came in. I can't say he looked any too pleased to see his nephew. 'Hallo,' he said, 'What the devil are you doing here? Can't a man be left in peace without being pestered by his bloody relations?' You'll excuse the language, sir, but that's the way Mr. Hinchliffe spoke. I left them to it, thinking that they'd better get their row over by them-

selves. But even in the office I could hear Mr. Hinchliffe cursing and swearing. But after a bit he quieted down. Mr. Venner stayed to dinner, and drove away directly afterwards.

"After he had gone, I could see that Mr. Hinchliffe was in a vile temper. He sat in here, muttering to himself and drinking far more of that mixture of his than was good for him. I was afraid every minute he'd break out and make a scene, but he didn't. He just sat there, and when everybody else had gone to bed, he called out to me. 'Here, Millington, damn you!' he shouted. 'Come and sit down, I want someone to talk to.'

"Thinking it best to humour him, I went and sat down opposite him. He wasn't exactly drunk, sir, if you understand me, but he was in that sort of confidential mood when he had to talk to somebody. He glared at me for a bit, as though he was going to eat me, and then, all of a sudden, he asked, 'Have you got any brats. Millington?'

"I told him that I had two children, a boy and a girl, both at school. 'Then you take my advice, and throttle them before they get any older,' he said. 'I never had any children myself, thank the Lord, but I've got a nephew and niece, and they're more damned nuisance than they're worth. That was my fool of a nephew who was here this evening.'

"He went on like that for a long time, sir. Told me that they were his sister's children, and the only relations he had in the world. 'Both fools,' he said, 'with no more guts between them than a wax doll. But the girl's the best of the pair, knows how to get herself up, if she doesn't know anything else.'

"Mr. Hinchliffe went on to tell me that he'd made a bit of money in his time. I'd guessed that already, for I could see that it didn't matter much to him what he spent. 'And when I retired, my rascally lawyer in-

sisted that I'd better make a will. Damn him! I can see his little game now clear enough. So I left everything to the girl, Christine's her name. If my fool of a nephew can't make enough out of his own tuppeny halfpenny business, that's his own look-out.' There were a lot of swear words sandwiched in between, sir, but that was nothing out of the way for Mr. Hinchliffe.

"I wondered what all this was leading to, but it took Mr. Hinchliffe a long time to get to the point. And then he told me that his lawyer was making love to his niece. I won't repeat the things he said about the gentleman, whose name I've forgotten. 'He's after my money, that's what it is!' he shouted, till I was afraid the whole hotel would hear him. 'Why, the old scoundrel is old enough to be her grandfather. If she's fool enough to marry him, she can. I'll give her away at the wedding, if she wants me to. I'd enjoy the joke, by heaven, I would! But that old skunk shan't have my money, I'll see to that!'

"It seems that this is what Mr. Venner had come to tell him. 'I wouldn't have believed him, except that he's too great a fool to make up a yarn like that for himself. And he brought me a couple of letters he'd written to her. Stole them from her bag or wherever women keep their things, I suppose. Just the sort of dirty trick he would play. However, that's none of my business. He was all Uncle Denis this and Uncle Denis that. Couldn't I use my influence to prevent his dear Christine throwing herself away upon an old man with one foot in the grave? Influence! I knew something a damned sight more effective than that.'

"I got him up to bed at last, still cursing about his nephew and niece. I hoped that I shouldn't have to hear any more of it, but next day after lunch, he sent for me up to his room. He seemed in a very good humour then. 'I've fixed it, Millington,' he cried. 'I've made

a new will. Fetch one of your staff along, and the two of you can witness it for me.' So I sent for Miss Quentin, and we witnessed the will for him.

"Then after Miss Quentin had gone, he went on to tell me all about it. 'I've made an entirely fresh will,' he said. 'This time I've left everything to that poor fool of a nephew of mine. And I'm going to send it up to my lawyer, telling him to keep it and tear up the old one. That'll give him the shock of his life, all right. We'll see if he's so sweet on the girl, when he knows that she won't get her dear Uncle Denis's money. Damn the old scoundrel's eyes! He'll find he's not so clever as he thought he was. And, after all, it doesn't matter a cuss either way. I'm good for another twenty years yet, and I'll see to it that there's precious little left by that time.' And I must say, I'd have given him a good twenty years. He wasn't an old man, and he looked as strong as a horse. The first thing I thought, when I saw his death in the papers, was that if he hadn't altered his will, he mightn't have died so suddenly."

"As no doubt you saw, the verdict at the inquest was one of death from natural causes," Dr. Priestley remarked.

Mr. Millington was becoming communicative under the influence of the old brandy. "Yes," he replied darkly. "And as I said at the time to one or two of my customers, it's wonderful how conveniently natural causes come along for some folk. I said then we'd be hearing more about it. And then one day there comes the news that Mr. Venner isn't to be found. Lucky for him if he isn't, I say."

"Have you seen Mr. Venner since the evening when he dined here with his uncle?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"I've seen him twice, sir. Mr. Hinchliffe went away from here about the end of May, up to Scotland some-

where. But before he went, he told me that he would be coming back in August. Sure enough, some time in the first week in August, I got a letter from him, asking me to keep the same room for him as he had before. And the day after I got the letter, Mr. Venner turned up in the afternoon in his car.

" He said he wanted to see me, and I took him into the office. He told me that he had heard from Mr. Hinchliffe, saying that he was coming back here, and asked me if I knew how long he meant to stay. I told him about the letter I'd had, but that Mr. Hinchliffe hadn't said how long he meant to stay. Then Mr. Venner said that he and his sister were rather worried about their uncle's health. He hadn't been very well in Scotland, and they were afraid that he wasn't as strong as he thought he was.

" Well, sir, I couldn't help smiling at that, knowing what I did. But it wasn't for me to say anything, though I wondered how much they knew about their uncle's will. Then Mr. Venner went on to say that he knew he could trust me to look after his uncle. He gave me his address in London, somewhere in the city it was. And he asked me to promise that if at any time I noticed anything wrong with Mr. Hinchliffe, I wouldn't say anything to him, but wire at once for Mr. Venner, and then send for the doctor."

" Mr. Venner said that you were to send for a doctor on your own responsibility?" Dr. Priestley asked.

" Yes, sir, and that I wasn't to say anything to Mr. Hinchliffe. Mr. Venner explained that his uncle would never admit that there was anything the matter with him, and that if I was to ask him first about the doctor, he'd say he didn't want one. And when I'd promised to do as he asked me, Mr. Venner drove off again. A couple of days or so later Mr. Hinchliffe turned up. He might have been ill, but there didn't seem to me to be

much wrong with him. He seemed to eat and drink much the same as before.

"But whether he'd been ill or not, he certainly caught a pretty bad cold after he'd been here a fortnight or so. There was a lot of influenza about at the time, and I dare say he had a slight touch of that. He didn't seem to get any better, and one day—August 24th it was, I remember—he didn't come down to breakfast. I went up to his room and found him in bed. But he swore there was nothing the matter with him, merely his cold that he couldn't throw off, and asked me to send out for some ammoniated quinine.

"I didn't altogether like the look of him, for I could see that he had a bit of a temperature. But I sent out for the quinine and took it up to him. You'll hardly believe it, sir, but he insisted on mixing it with that rum and creme de menthe cocktail of his. Said it didn't taste so bad that way."

"An extremely nasty mixture, I should imagine," said Dr. Priestley. "Did it do him any good?"

"Well, sir, it didn't seem to me it did. By lunch time he was looking pretty seedy and feeling it, too, though he wouldn't say so. Then I remembered what I had promised to Mr. Venner. Mr. Hinchliffe certainly wasn't well, and I could see that he wasn't going to do anything about it except take this quinine stuff. So I made up my mind, sent a wire to Mr. Venner, and then rang up Dr. Hardwicke, who said he'd come round later in the afternoon.

"And then the rumpus began. I tell you, sir, I'm not likely to forget it. I would never have believed that a gentleman like Mr. Hinchliffe would have carried on so. The evening after Mr. Venner had been to see him was nothing to it. I went up to his room and told him that Dr. Hardwicke was coming round to see him, and that I was sure they would get on very well together."

A faint smile flitted across Dr. Priestley's face. " And what did Mr. Hinchliffe say to that?" he asked.

" Say!" exclaimed Mr. Millington. " I shouldn't like to repeat what he said, even if I could remember half of it. He sat up in bed, and let loose such a flow of language as I've never imagined. He called me every name he could think of, and that was a good few, asked me why the hell I couldn't mind my own business, and finished up by saying that he wouldn't stop here another hour. And I was to get out at once, if I didn't want my something face bashed in. And when the something doctor came, I was to tell him to—well, sir, it doesn't matter now what he was to do.

" I wasn't sorry to get out of that room. I simply daren't tell him that I had wired to Mr. Venner. That was his funeral, not mine. I thought perhaps Mr. Hinchliffe would get over it, if I left him alone. But the next thing I heard was that he had rung for some shaving water, and asked for his bill.

" I didn't quite know what to do. But I rang up Doctor Hardwicke, and told him that he needn't trouble, after all. I thought that if he saw Mr. Hinchliffe, and he carried on to him like he had to me, the doctor would have had him certified as a lunatic. And then, some time later, I heard Mr. Hinchliffe in the hall, bellowing like a bull to Miss Quentin about his bill. I kept out of the way, for fear there'd be another row if he saw me. And then, just in the nick of time, Mr. Venner and a lady I took to be his sister turned up.

" Mr. Hinchliffe met them in the hall. I heard him ask them where the hell they'd come from, or something like that. They told him that they'd just run down to see him, as they hadn't seen him for so long. After a bit he said that since they had a car outside, they could take him away. It didn't matter where, as long

as it was away from this bloody pub. Those were his very words, sir."

"A most unpleasant experience for you, Mr. Millington," said Dr. Priestley. "Did you witness the departure?"

"I watched them out of the window, sir. Mr. Venner had a grey saloon, and they had some difficulty in getting Mr. Hinchliffe into it. The fact is, that he wasn't very steady on his legs. It may have been the temperature he had, or it may have been that favourite cocktail of his. He'd had over a dozen of them that day. Anyway, he stumbled against the car, and I think he must have cut his hand on the wing, for Miss Venner took out a handkerchief and tied it up. At last they managed to hoist him into the back and drove off. And that's the last I've seen of any of them."

"A good riddance, on the whole," Dr. Priestley remarked. "Did you notice whether the car was well-kept or not?"

"Now you mention it, sir, I remember that it was very dirty, as though it had been driven through a lot of mud. I don't know why that should have been. It had been raining, certainly, but it's a good tarred main road all the way from here to London."

"And Mr. Hinchliffe. Did it strike you that he was seriously ill when he left here?"

Mr. Millington shook his head emphatically. "No, sir, it did not. No man who was very ill could have kicked up the shindy he did. I should say he'd just got a touch of the 'flu, nothing more. As I say, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw in the papers he was dead. And I've always had in the back of my mind since, that that will had something to do with it. And now, gentlemen, I hope you will honour me by having one with me."

Dr. Priestley went to bed that evening feeling that his

visit to the Mermaid had fully justified itself. Mr. Millington could not in any way be considered as an interested party. His evidence could be accepted at its face value. It had solved the reason for the sudden alteration of Hinchliffe's will. Dr. Priestley felt distinctly pleased with himself. His theory regarding the relations between Christine Venner and Coleforth was confirmed.

But it was a curious business altogether, and he frowned as he scribbled down a few notes. Venner had spied upon his sister, and disclosed her secret to their uncle. He probably guessed what Mr. Hinchliffe's attitude would be. To Venner it had been in the nature of a gamble. Hinchliffe would certainly cut Christine Venner out of his will, and he might replace her name by that of Ernest Venner.

Even then, when the gamble had succeeded, he had done himself no immediate good. There was every prospect that his uncle would live for many years. Or, to put it the other way, there was very little likelihood of his dying in time to relieve Venner's immediate necessities. The bill had to be met by the end of November. Hinchliffe's action, though it might checkmate Coleforth, seemed hardly likely to benefit Ernest Venner.

But then came the curious incident of Venner's second visit to the Mermaid, and his interview with Mr. Millington. This, apparently innocent in itself, seemed to Dr. Priestley to be in reality a very ingenious move. The strategy was obvious. Hinchliffe, with his unreasoning hatred of the medical profession, would certainly shake the dust of Bindon-on-Sea from off his feet at any threat of a doctor being called in. Venner, arriving opportunely on the spot, would find little difficulty in carrying off his uncle to Clewer Street.

Ten days after Hinchliffe's arrival at the Venners' flat, he died. Venner's financial difficulties immediately

came to an end. The sequence of events was extraordinarily suggestive. And yet Faversham, who upon such a clear issue could not have been mistaken, had declared the cause of Hinchliffe's death to have been tetanus.

A possibility which had passed through Dr. Priestley's mind at an earlier date, now presented itself with greater force. Could Venner have deliberately infected his uncle with the tetanus bacillus? Dr. Priestley's experience had taught him never to reject a hypothesis as impossible, until it had been definitely disproved. But how could a man in Venner's position have secured a culture of the bacillus?

Dr. Priestley glanced at the notes which he had just made, and smiled. They certainly suggested that Venner's disappearance came within the first of the classes into which he had divided such phenomena.

5

Dr. Priestley returned to London on Monday morning. And that evening, shortly before seven o'clock, Superintendent Hanslet made his appearance at Westbourne Terrace.

"I know you don't dine till eight, Professor," he said. "But you asked me to come early, so here I am. I got your letter all right, and I made the inquiries you suggested. And I came across something pretty queer——"

"Take your time, Superintendent," Dr. Priestley interrupted him. "We shall find some sherry in the study. A glass of sherry is by far the best appetiser before dinner, in spite of the modern craze for cocktails. I asked you to come early, because Faversham and Oldland are coming to dinner, and we could hardly

expect them to be interested in the investigations which I suggested you should make."

Dr. Priestley ushered Hanslet into the study, and poured him out a glass of sherry. "Now, if you care to tell me——" he continued.

Hanslet sipped his sherry, and put the glass down on the table nearby. "I'm not so sure that Sir Alured and Doctor Oldland wouldn't be interested," he said. "'Pon my word, Professor, I can't make it out. But I want to say this, before I start. If the coroner hadn't brought in that Hinchliffe's death was due to natural causes, I should have asked these questions long before now, on my own account."

Dr. Priestley nodded. "So I supposed. It would only have been a matter of routine to do so."

"Exactly. First of all, I made inquiries about Venner's car. He had one of his own until last April, when he sold it. His excuse was that he could not afford to keep a car. But he made an arrangement with a garage in Kensington, by which he could hire a car whenever he wanted one, and drive it himself.

"He rang up this garage about midday on August 24th, and asked that a saloon car should be sent round at once to 7 Clewer Street. The garage sent a grey twenty-horse Daimler, which Venner took over, sending the chauffeur back to the garage. He returned the car about six o'clock the same day. It was in a filthy condition, which he explained by saying that he had driven into a farmyard by mistake. That was, by the way, the last occasion upon which Venner hired a car from the garage."

"August 24th was the day upon which Venner fetched his uncle from Bindon-on-Sea," Dr. Priestley remarked. "That, at least, seems definitely established. Did you ask about the damage to the wing?"

"The metal of the near front wheel was slightly torn,

so the garage people told me. The car had been involved in a very slight collision a few days before. The damage was hardly noticeable, though the edge of the torn metal was certainly sharp, sharp enough for one of the garage hands to tear his finger on it when he was washing the car down that evening. They had the wing repaired, after that."

"Did the man suffer any ill-effects from this accident?" Dr. Priestley asked swiftly.

"No, I don't think so. He was the man I talked to at the garage, who told me about the car being so dirty. He only mentioned that he had cut his finger because I called his attention to the wing being damaged. I'm pretty sure that nothing serious came of it, or he would have told me so."

"No doubt he would," Dr. Priestley thoughtfully agreed. "And the chemist. Was I right in my conjecture?"

"You were, Professor. I went into the shop at the corner of Clewer Street, and saw the proprietor, Mr. Pepper, himself. He didn't know Mr. Venner by sight, but he knows Miss Venner, because she always deals there. He remembers Miss Venner coming into his shop some time during the last week in August and buying a bottle of ammoniated quinine. She told him it was for her uncle, who was staying with her and had a very bad cold."

Probably Hinchliffe's own prescription, thought Dr. Priestley. He had ammoniated quinine while he was at the Mermaid. A harmless enough compound, though not too pleasant to take.

"Then, as you suggested in your letter, I asked to see his poison book. Purely as a matter of form, I told him, as I happened to be in the shop. He trotted it out at once, and I looked through it. And I found that on May 1st last, Miss Venner had bought a couple of tins of

Iver's Vermin Killer. There was her signature, Christine Venner, sprawled right across the page.

"That made me think quite a lot. I asked Pepper if he remembered Miss Venner signing the book, and he said he remembered quite well. Miss Venner had come into the shop to buy some face-powder, or something. She told Pepper they were bothered with mice at number seven. They didn't keep a cat, and traps seemed to be no good. She asked if he had anything that would get rid of them, and he recommended this Iver's Vermin Killer. So she bought a couple of tins of it. I asked him why it had been necessary for her to sign the poison-book, and he told me that it was because the stuff contained a large quantity of—what the dickens do you think, Professor?—strychnine!"

In spite of the emphasis which Hanslet laid upon the word, Dr. Priestley made no reply. He went to the book-shelves with which the study was lined, took down a standard work on poisons, and turned over the pages.

"Ah, here we are," he said. "This is the passage relating to Iver's Vermin Killer. 'This substance consists of a mixture of flour and strychnine, coloured with ultramarine. Analysis of a tin of the size retailed at sixpence has shown it to contain 2.7 grains of strychnine!' Considerably more than the average fatal dose, in fact. No wonder that it is necessary to sign the poison book when purchasing Iver's Vermin Killer."

"Of course it's necessary!" Hanslet exclaimed. "But don't you see, Professor? Miss Venner buys strychnine and four months later her uncle dies under her roof, under conditions that suggest strychnine poisoning. Doctor Oldland had his suspicions, and refused to sign the certificate. It was only Sir Alured's evidence that secured a verdict of natural causes."

Dr. Priestley shook his head. "I am afraid that your implied argument is not conclusive," he said. "Do

officers of Scotland Yard study precedent, I wonder? If so, you may remember the famous case of Madeleine Smith. She purchased a quantity of prussic acid, ostensibly because she had been told that it was good for the complexion, if used as a face-wash.

"A little later, a young man to whom she had been engaged died, under suspicious circumstances, from poisoning by prussic acid. It was found that she had ample motive for desiring the death of the young man, and that she might have had an opportunity of administering the poison. Yet, although she was charged with murder, the crime could not be proved. The trial was held in Scotland, and the jury returned a verdict of not proven."

"I don't know anything about Madeleine Smith," Hanslet replied. "Anyhow, from what you tell me, I'll bet an English jury would have found her guilty. But that's not the point. You must admit, Professor, that that purchase of strychnine by Christine Venner is a pretty queer coincidence. And, what's more, you must have suspected something of the kind when you suggested that I should have a look at Pepper's poison book."

"You know my passion for facts, Superintendent," said Dr. Priestley calmly.

"Yes, that's all very well, Professor. You collect facts, like some people collect stamps. You look them over, classify them, and stick them in a book, where you can look them up when you want to. That's all very well for you, but I'm a policeman, and this confounded vermin killer sticks in my gizzard. Look here, Professor, entirely between ourselves, and in the strictest confidence, do you think that there is any chance that Sir Alured made a bloomer?"

"I think the chance is so small as to be negligible," Dr. Priestley replied. "Nobody is immune from

occasional mistakes, so that it cannot be said that the chance you speak of does not exist. But in this case, and Doctor Oldland will bear me out in this, the chance of a mistake is practically impossible. The symptoms of tetanus and of strychnine poisoning closely resemble one another. This is a matter of common knowledge. But in the course of post-mortem examination any possible doubt vanishes. Even a comparatively inexperienced pathologist could not fail to detect the signs of strychnine poisoning. And Faversham is universally admitted to be at the head of his profession."

"Well, putting it that way, it does seem impossible," Hanslet agreed reluctantly. "But it does make you wonder, doesn't it? I don't worry much about Miss Venner having bought the stuff. She may have handed it over to her brother. It was in the house at one time, that's the point. And I'd very much like to know if it was used for the mice, or whether it was kept for some other purpose. I can't help wishing that that confounded verdict hadn't been given before we had a chance of proper investigation."

Before Dr. Priestley could reply, Sir Alured Faversham was announced. "I say, Priestley, I'm awfully sorry I couldn't turn up the other evening," he said. "I was called into consultation unexpectedly, and had to spend practically the whole night in my laboratory. And in the bustle of it all I quite forgot to ring you up to tell you I couldn't come."

"There's no need to apologise," Dr. Priestley replied. "I know that you are always liable to be called away. But I thought at the time that the weather might have kept you at home. It was threatening to snow, you remember."

"Threatening to snow, was it?" said Faversham. "I'm afraid I didn't notice it. Too busy, I suppose. Anyhow, the weather wouldn't have kept me away

from your hospitable door. Sherry? Yes, rather. You know my weakness for sherry. Well, Superintendent, how's the world of crime been getting on since I saw you last?"

They chatted for a few minutes, until Oldland was announced. "Hallo!" he said, as he glanced round the room. "Hope I'm not late. That's the worst of my profession, one never can count upon getting anywhere on time. By the way, Priestley, you've been away, I gather. I rang you up on Saturday evening, and they told me you were out of town."

"I prescribed for myself a change of air during the week-end," Dr. Priestley replied. "Was your message important?"

"Not in the least. I merely thought that you might be interested to hear that I had seen your friend, Christine Venner, once more. She sent round for me because she had a bad cold. Nothing serious the matter with her. Not serious enough to interfere with her make-up. You never saw such a picture as she made in bed. Flowers all over the room, like a damned conservatory. I was able to make a pretty good guess where they came from. I asked her if she had any news of her brother, but she said that she hadn't heard a word about him."

Faversham put down his glass with a groan. "Oh, Lord," he exclaimed. "Not Venner again! I'm sick to death of the sound of the fellow's name. He's gone, and I'll bet anybody who likes that we shall none of us ever see or hear of him again. Can't you provide us with a fresh problem to sharpen our wits on, Mr. Hanslet?"

But at this moment the gong sounded, and they went in to dinner. During the meal, no reference was made to Venner. Dr. Priestley, perhaps because Faversham was so definitely bored with the subject, deliberately steered the conversation into different channels

It was not until late in the evening, when they were sitting round the fire in the study, that the name of Venner came up again. It was Oldland who introduced it, after a fairly long silence which none of the others seemed anxious to break.

"Do you mind if I have a last whisky before I go, Priestley?" he said. "No, don't you move, I'll get it for myself. D'you know, I can't get that girl out of my head. Christine Venner, I mean. Sorry, Faversham, I forgot your taboo for the moment."

"Don't mind me," Faversham replied. "We've kept off the subject for longer than I dared hope. If you must drag up the Venners again, you must, I suppose. Tell us why Christine Venner haunts you like this."

"Not because of her looks or her character, I assure you," said Oldland. "She hasn't got either. It's her outlook on life that beats me. The only thing that worried her when I saw her the other day was whether she'd be fit enough to go to some dance or other that she'd set her heart upon."

"I don't see anything very extraordinary in that," Faversham remarked. "What did you expect of her?"

"What did I expect of her? Why, some show of concern, at least, about her brother. Dash it all, it is only a little more than a fortnight since the fellow vanished, leaving no trace. And all that his sister thinks about is this confounded dance."

"Why shouldn't she be philosophic?" Faversham replied. "You and Priestley—I don't include Mr. Hanslet, for I expect that he has lost interest in the matter long ago—seem to me to be hunting for a mare's nest. When the subject came up I said that Venner had quietly effaced himself for a very good reason of his own. The fact that nothing has been heard of him

all this time seems to prove I was right. Don't you agree, Priestley?"

Dr. Priestley contented himself with nodding rather vaguely, and Faversham continued. "If I, who had only seen the man once in my life, could guess that, do you suppose his own sister couldn't? Of course she could! Why should she worry about Venner? She knows well enough that he's gone out of her life, and I don't suppose that she regrets it. Why should she concern herself with anything more serious than her own amusement?"

"I remember, Professor, that you said that cases of disappearance could be divided into four classes," said Hanslet. "Sir Alured evidently puts this one into the fourth class."

"Certainly I do," Faversham replied. "There doesn't seem to me to be any reasonable doubt about it."

Oldland shook his head. "Sorry, Faversham, but I don't agree. I'll admit that appearances are on your side, but that's not everything. Venner simply isn't the man to decide on a step like that. However much he disliked the circumstances in which he found himself, he's have preferred muddling through them to making any decisive move."

"Then what class do you put his disappearance into, Doctor Oldland?" Hanslet asked.

Oldland took a pull at his drink before he replied. "There are several very queer points about the case," he said, with a glance towards Dr. Priestley. "It's not easy to give a definite opinion before those points are cleared up. But I don't see how the fellow can possibly be dead. What's become of the body? Somebody would have stumbled over it by now, for certain. On the whole, I'm inclined to plump for the third category. Venner might well be suffering from some

temporary mental or nervous disturbance. What do you think yourself, Superintendent?"

Hanslet hesitated. "I think it's more likely that he's suffering from a guilty conscience," he muttered darkly.

"A fugitive from justice!" Faversham exclaimed. "The second category, by jove! The meeting is anything but unanimous. If you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Hanslet, yours is the typical policeman's view. If a man disappears, therefore he has committed a crime, although it has not been discovered. 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth,' eh? But what about our host? He hasn't given his opinion yet, I notice."

"I prefer to reserve my judgment," replied Dr. Priestley, thus appealed to.

"Cautious man!" Faversham exclaimed mockingly. "But I might have guessed that was what you would say. It's a pity though. I hoped that you would produce some startling theory that Venner had been murdered for his money, and so place his disappearance in the first category. Then all would have been represented. Fortunately, it doesn't seem to matter to anybody what's happened to Venner. I vote we leave him to stew in his own juice. In any case, it's time I was going home. I've got a heavy day in front of me to-morrow."

After his guests had gone, Dr. Priestley once more took out the Venner dossier. He had long ago made up his mind that there was some close, though at present obscure, relation between Venner's disappearance and his uncle's death. Anything, therefore, which concerned Hinchliffe was worthy of addition to his notes.

To the list of dates which he had already composed he added these items.

May 1st.—Miss Venner purchases two tins of Iver's Vermin Killer from Pepper, chemist, Clewer Street.

May 4th.—Ernest Venner visits his uncle at Bindon-

on-Sea, and discloses to him the relations between Christine Venner and Coleforth.

May 5th.—Hinchliffe alters his will in favour of Ernest Venner.

August (date uncertain, but during first week).—Ernest Venner visits Millington at the Mermaid, and gives him instructions in case his uncle should be taken ill.

III

CHARLES ALCOTT, DECEASED

I

THAT year, a winter of unusual severity had been predicted for the south of Endland. But until well after the New Year, it seemed as though the prediction would be falsified. With the exception of a spell of frost at the end of November and the beginning of December, during which fell the few flakes of snow which Dr. Priestley had seen on the night when Oldland had dined with him, the weather had been mild and open.

The change came on January 17th. A bitter north-easterly wind sprang up, and the temperature fell well below freezing-point. Heavy clouds drifted across the sky, and the country-folk declared that they could smell the snow coming. The more sophisticated spoke of wireless forecasts, and of snowstorms advancing across the North Sea from Scandinavia. They were not disappointed. The snow began to fall in earnest on the evening of January 18th, and by next morning the greater part of Southern England lay hidden under a white blanket.

But, as so often happens, the thickness of this blanket was very uneven. A strong wind had persisted during the fall, piling up the snow in drifts. The actual amount of snow that fell was not more than a few inches, and, in the open, the fields were covered with nothing more than a light powder. The greater part of the snow had collected in depressions, and on the weather side of hedges. The result of this was that the roads, where

they ran across the level, were quite passable. But stretches that ran between banks or high hedges were snowed up in many places to a depth of several feet.

Gangs were immediately set to work to clear them, beginning with the more important main roads first. The Weyford Rural District Council, in particular, was obliged to engage a large number of casual labourers. In this district the drifts were unusually deep, and the harassed surveyor was at his wits' end to know which roads to clear first.

Spade, shovel and improvised snow plough were set busily to work, and by the evening of the 19th most of the obstructed main roads had been cleared sufficiently to permit of a single line of traffic, or at the worst, a suitable detour had been cleared. But the byroads had to wait their turn. And it was not until ten o'clock on the morning of Saturday, the 20th, that a gang of four men set to work on the road which led from Weyford past Markheys, Sir Alured Faversham's house.

The state of this road was typical. For rather more than a mile out of Weyford it ran across a stretch of rough moorland, and was unfenced. For this distance it was no more than a few inches deep in snow, which offered no serious impediment to traffic. After leaving the moorland, it entered cultivated country, and was bordered by hedges on either side. Against these hedges the snow had piled up to a considerable depth, but in most places the centre of the road remained fairly clear. At last, close to the entrance to Markheys, the road entered a cutting, with an average depth of eight feet or so. And into this cutting the snow had drifted, filling it completely. From the fields on either side, no trace of the cutting could be seen. The surface of the snow gave no indication of the road which lay beneath it.

The gang, under the leadership of its foreman, George Stickland, reached this spot. "Reckon we've got a

job ahead of us here, George," remarked one of the party pessimistically.

"Reckon we have," replied George curtly. "We shan't do no good by looking at it, though. Bring along they shovels, and let's make a start. 'Tis the worst patch we've struck yet."

They set to work deliberately, and began to excavate a track into the mouth of the cutting. They had not got very far when a woman's voice hailed them. "Morning, Mr. Stickland! So you've set to work to clear us a path at last, then?"

George looked up. "Morning, Mrs. Waller," he replied. "Yes, we're going to see what we can do for you. You be going to work, then?"

He stood, leaning on the handle of his shovel, regarding Mrs. Waller. She stood at the edge of the road, a plump, elderly body, wrapped in many folds of an enormous woollen scarf. Her business was to look after Markheys during Sir Alured's absence, and for this purpose she walked over daily from Weyford.

"'Tain't likely you'll be through by dinner-time, Mr. Stickland," said Mrs. Waller. "The road's blocked for nigh on half a mile, right past the gates. 'Tis no good trying to get though, the snow's too treacherous. I has to walk across the fields, and then through the gate on to the lawn. The front way's fair smothered."

"We shan't knock off this afternoon, Saturday though it be," George replied. "The boss says the road's got to be cleared even if it means a lot of overtime. We'll work on till dark, and if we don't get through by then, we'll make another start on Monday morning."

"'Tis lucky the family's away," said Mrs. Waller. "There's no way to get to the house but by walking, and her ladyship's not too fond of that, what with her arthritis and all. I wouldn't go so far as to say that the young ladies wouldn't think it fine fun. But how would

Sir Alured get backwards and forwards from the station, I'd like to know?"

"Sir Alured? A bit of walking wouldn't frighten him, don't you fret. I've seen him out walking on a Sunday morning many a time, looking as if he enjoyed it. Well, we'll never get through if we don't get to work, I reckon."

He began shovelling again, and Mrs. Waller walked on. But she had not gone many paces before she stopped and turned round. "If you be going to work all the afternoon, maybe you might like to come up to the house at dinner-time," she said. "You and the chaps, that is. You could have your dinner in the kitchen, and I'd put a kettle on for a cup of tea for them as likes it."

"Thank 'ee kindly, Mrs. Waller," replied George. "We'll come along, never fear, if it isn't putting you to any trouble."

"It won't be no trouble, Mr. Stickland. You come along to the back door and walk in." And Mrs. Waller went on towards Markheys, visible a short distance away through the snow-clad trees.

George resumed his interrupted work, and the gang dug themselves steadily towards the heart of the cutting. It was slow work, a passage had to be cut wide enough to take a cart, and the shovelfuls of snow had to be flung clear. The wind had died away to a complete calm, but, although the sun was shining, it was freezing heavily. The men sweated freely as they worked in silence, resting now and then for a minute's breather.

"Lummy, George, my back aches!" one of them exclaimed at last. "This perishin' snow do hang terrible heavy. Ain't it getting on for time to knock off for dinner?"

George straightened himself and extracted a massive silver watch from an inner pocket. "'Tain't barely

twelve o'clock yet," he replied. "We'll stick it for another hour, and then we'll go up and see Mrs. Waller at the house. Wouldn't do to knock off afore one o'clock, in case the boss comes along."

The man who had spoken grunted, and resumed his work. He was a few feet in advance of the rest, clearing a narrow path which the others widened as they followed him. He drove his shovel into the snow, then threw it over his shoulder to the top of the drift. All at once, as he drove it forward, his shovel resisted the lift. He seemed to have driven it under something heavy and unyielding.

"Hullo, what's up now?" he muttered. "There's a bloomin' great stone or something fallen into the road."

Still muttering, he began to dig round the object, whatever it was, clearing the snow away from it. Until at last he uncovered something that made him start back in amazement. "Hey, George!" he cried. "Come and look here a minute. There's summat wrong here!"

"What d'you mean?" said George, as he came up and peered over his shoulder. "What's that you found? Hullo!"

The removal of the snow had disclosed a patch of grey cloth, covering something as rigid as stone. George pushed his subordinate out of the way, and fell on his knees beside it. Working with his hands, he cleared the snow away. The patch of grey cloth grew until it became the back of a man's coat. And, by the shape of it, there was no doubt that its owner was within.

"Here, bear a hand, all of you!" George exclaimed. "There's a poor chap buried under here. Stand round, and let's see if we can lift him out."

As soon as more of the snow had been cleared away

there was no difficulty in lifting him. He was frozen absolutely rigid, and remained in his original posture, his arms crossed, and his knees drawn up to his chin. The neck was bent, with the forehead nearly touching the knees, and it was only with difficulty that George could make out his features.

"He's dead, ain't he, George?" asked the man who had discovered him, fearfully.

"Ay, he's dead, right enough," George replied, as they laid him back on the snow. "You'd be dead if you was frozen stiff as that. Why, he must have been here since the snow fell, and that the day before yesterday. Fell down and went to sleep like, all huddled up, I reckon. They do say that's what happens to anyone caught out in the snow."

"Do 'ee know who 'tis, George?" one of the men asked. "Do seem as if 'twas a stranger to I."

"Nay, I never seen him afore," George replied. "'Tis a stranger to these parts, I reckon. Well, we can't do nothing, 'tis a job for Sergeant Blewitt, over to Weyford. We'll have to get him along. There's a telephone up to Markheys, isn't there?"

"Ay, there's a telephone," said the man who had last spoken. "Be you goin' to use 'un?"

"I'll run up to the house and see Mrs. Waller. You chaps bide here. Better not disturb anything, the Sergeant will want to see just how we found him. And if the boss comes along, tell him where I've gone."

He made his way up to the house, where Mrs. Waller greeted him. "Ah, here you be, Mr. Stickland. I wasn't expecting you yet awhile, and the kettle's not on. But it won't take me long to set it boiling. Where's the other chaps? Ain't they coming up?"

"They'll be along presently," George replied. "I came up because I've a message to send to Weyford. There's a telephone in the house, ain't there?"

"Ay, there's a telephone right enough, but it ain't no manner of use, Mr. Stickland. Sir Alured, he had it cut off when he went away, so as he wouldn't have to pay for it while the house was empty."

George swore beneath his breath. There was nothing for it, then, but to walk back to Weyford. With a hurried excuse to Mrs. Waller, he left the house, and set off over the fields towards the town at the best pace of which he was capable.

He was a swift walker, when he set his mind to it, and he reached the police station at Weyford shortly before one o'clock. Sergeant Blewitt, an eminently phlegmatic individual, listened to his story without betraying any sign of excitement. "So you left your chaps on the spot?" he said. "That's right. I'll have to come and have a look, I suppose, but the roads aren't fit to take the bike on. Tell you what, George, I'll ring up Doctor Gainsford, and he'll run us out in his car. He'll have to see this body of yours sooner or later anyhow."

Doctor Gainsford, elderly, and looking forward to a Saturday afternoon by his fireside, was not too pleased at being called out to inspect a dead man. However, he picked the Sergeant and George Stickland up in his car, and drove towards Markheys. They found the members of the gang sitting huddled together in the warmest spot they could find, eating their bread and cheese.

"Now then, where's this body?" Doctor Gainsford asked briskly. "I don't want to waste the rest of the afternoon out here."

Stickland led the way into the cutting, where the body, covered with a piece of sacking, lay in its original position on the snow. The doctor jerked the sacking aside, then bent down and felt the body. "Beyond any help of mine, I'm afraid," he said. "Do you know who it is, sergeant?"

"Can't say that I do, sir," replied Blewitt. "I've

never set eyes on him before, that I can tell. What would you like done with him, sir?"

"Damned if I know. I can't examine him properly out here. And it means sending for an ambulance to get him back to Weyford."

"Beg pardon, sir," George ventured. "Couldn't we carry him to Markheys? There's nobody there but Mrs. Waller, and the ambulance could come out for him later."

Doctor Gainsford jumped at the chance of getting under cover. "That's a good idea!" he said. "You run along and tell Mrs. Waller we're coming. I'll take all responsibility. I'm quite sure Faversham wouldn't mind, he ought to be used to bodies by this time. There's a rug in the car, we can carry him in that, with a man at each corner."

Stickland went on in advance to warn Mrs. Waller. She took the news of the discovery philosophically enough. "Lor, now, Mr. Stickland, what a turn it must have given you, finding him like that!" But when it came to bringing the body into the house, she was adamant.

"No, Mr. Stickland!" she said firmly. "I ain't going to have no corpses coming into this house, not while I'm in charge. It's not the master I'm thinking of. He makes his money by cutting of them up, as everybody knows. But he has proper places for doing that in, and this isn't one of them. And I don't care if Doctor Gainsford and Sergeant Blewitt says the corpse shall come in. I say that it shan't. Why, what would her ladyship and the young ladies say if they thought there was corpses lying about all over the house?"

"But it won't be for long, Mrs. Waller," Stickland replied. "Only until the ambulance comes out from Weyford."

"I don't care how long it might be for. That corpse

isn't coming in here, and that's that. Why, 'tisn't as if anyone knew who it was, even. But if you must have somewhere to put it, you can use the potting-shed. That's the key, over there on the dresser."

So it was that when the procession arrived, bearing the dead man between them, they were directed tc the potting-shed, which smelt faintly but pleasantly of earth and tarred twine. Here it was laid upon the bench. and Stickland and his men returned to their work.

The sergeant took out his note-book, and began to jot down particulars. The body was that of a slightly built man of between thirty-five and forty. He had not shaved, apparently, for some little time before his death, for his chin was covered with a light stubble. He was wearing a shabby grey overcoat, beneath which was an equally shabby brown coat and waistcoat. A pair of grey flannel trousers, badly worn at the knees, a pair of old shoes, very much down at heel, and a greasy cap completed his outer garments.

"Looks to me, sir, as if he was some poor fellow tramping the roads," observed the sergeant.

"He's not an ordinary casual," the doctor replied. "Look at his hands. They're filthy, but they've been well kept at one time. And by the look of his face, you can see he's a cut above the average tramp. A clerk, or something like that, out of work and looking for a job."

"Maybe you're right, sir. Queer he should be on the by-road like this. It doesn't lead anywhere in particular. Only to the villages lying round about." Then, after a moment's pause, "It was the cold that killed him, sir?"

"No doubt about that. Look at his face and hands. You see those red patches? They are characteristic of death from cold. Of course, I can't be absolutely certain until I've got him to the mortuary and examined

him properly. But, so far as I can see, there are no signs of injury. He can't have been run over, or anything like that. I expect he just fell down from exhaustion, and went to sleep. He would unconsciously huddle himself up like that, in an attempt to keep warm, and that accounts for the position in which he was found."

"Can you say how long he's been dead, sir?"

"Long enough for him to become as rigid as frozen mutton. I can't say more than that, but it oughtn't to be difficult to deduce it. It was freezing hard all Wednesday and Thursday, and the snow began to fall on Thursday evening. Run and ask Mrs. Waller if she went along the road on Thursday on her way home, and if so, what time it was and whether she met anybody."

The sergeant went to the house, and returned a few minutes later. "Mrs. Waller says that she went home by the road as she always did till it was snowed up, sir. She thinks it was between half-past three and four on Thursday, and she saw nobody until she was nearly back in Weyford. She didn't meet any strangers at all, sir."

"I see. Well, I expect this poor fellow got here about dusk, and either fell, or lay down by the roadside. The place Stickland showed us as where the body was found was right at the edge of the road, under the bank. It began to snow about seven o'clock, if I remember rightly, and I expect that he died some time about then. At a rough estimate, you can say that he has been dead about forty hours. Now, I can do nothing more here. I'll get back to Weyford, and have the ambulance sent out. You can ride back with it, and see to the body being put in the mortuary."

After the doctor had gone, Sergeant Blewitt scribbled

a few more notes in his book. It then dawned upon him that it might be a matter of some difficulty to establish the dead man's identity. The unfortunates who tramp the road do not, as a rule, carry visiting cards with them.

However, he set to work to examine the pockets. The left-hand pocket of the trousers had a large hole in it, and was empty. The right-hand pocket had been patched, and contained seven pennies, a halfpenny, and a sixpence with a hole in it. In one of the waistcoat pockets were two half-smoked cigarettes. But in the inner breast pocket of the coat were two dirty pieces of paper, with writing upon them.

Sergeant Blewitt examined these with interest. They might possibly throw light upon who the man was, and where he had come from. The first was a letter, so folded and creased as to be almost illegible. It was written on the commonest of paper, in a scrawling, uneducated hand, and ran as follows.

"DERE SON,

"This is to say i am well but in poor health the Dr says you will not have time in your job being so far away to come home for Xmas which i shall miss you it is a long time since i saw you Dere Son when the Whether is better i shall be alright my love dere son yr loving Dad Hy Alcott."

"Well, that settles the chap's name, anyhow," muttered the sergeant. "If the father's name is Alcott, his must be too. There's an address of some kind at the head of this letter, but I'm blest if I can read it."

He took the letter to the door of the potting-shed and at last contrived to decipher the address. "10 Silver Lane, Barnsley." He scratched his head at this

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Barnsley sounded familiar. He had seen it in the list of football results. In the Northern Section of the Third Division of the League, he felt sure. Playing Hull City this very day, he believed. Must be up North somewhere, then. Could Alcott have been on his way to or from Barnsley? If so, what on earth was he doing in this out-of-the-way spot?

Blewitt put the letter in his note-book and turned his attention to the second piece of paper. This was merely a scrap, of irregular shape. But it was of superior quality, and on it was written, in a round feminine hand:

"Sir Alured Faversham, K.B.E.
"Markheys
"Nr Weyford
"Hant"

The sergeant nodded to himself as he put this second piece of paper in his note-book. That explained how Alcott came to be in this part of the world. He had Sir Alured's address, and meant to go and see him. To beg for assistance, most likely. He wouldn't be likely to know that Sir Alured was in London and the house empty.

And then Sergeant Blewitt was struck by a bright idea. If Alcott knew Sir Alured, it was at least possible that Sir Alured knew Alcott. If he could identify him, all difficulty would be at an end. Blewitt paid a second visit to the house, and obtained Sir Alured's London address from Mrs. Waller.

By the time that the ambulance arrived, he had decided what he would do, and, having seen the body deposited in the mortuary, which was merely a shed in the grounds of the local hospital, he proceeded to do it. The body was divested of its outer clothing,

beneath which was a flannel shirt and woollen vest and drawers, clean enough, but ragged. And, on the neck-band of the shirt was a faded name, scrawled in marking-ink, Chas. Alcott.

Identification was not going to present a very formidable problem, after all. Sergeant Blewitt's next business was at the telephone. He rang up enquiries, found Sir Alured's Margaret Street number, and put a call through. He was lucky enough to find Sir Alured at home, and stated his reasons for ringing up.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but this is Sergeant Blewitt, speaking from Weyford," he said.

"Good-afternoon, Blewitt," Sir Alured replied. "What can I do for you? Nothing wrong at Markheys, I hope."

"Nothing at all, sir. I've just come from there, as it happens. I'm sorry to trouble you, sir, but could you tell me if you know anybody of the name of Alcott, Charles Alcott?"

"Alcott, Alcott," Sir Alured replied. "The name's familiar, somehow. Wait a minute. Yes, I've got it. I had a laboratory assistant of that name once. Very decent young fellow, a Yorkshireman, I remember. Left me to take up some job or other nearer his home. What about him?"

"Well, sir, the roadmen were clearing the road by Markheys to-day and found the frozen body of a man who appears to be Charles Alcott. I've been wondering if you could manage to come down and identify him for certain, sir."

"Frozen!" Sir Alured exclaimed. "Poor chap! And close to Markheys, too. Why, I haven't heard of him since he left me, and I wasn't living at Markheys then. Yes, I'll certainly come down, Blewitt. There's a train leaves Waterloo about ten o'clock to-morrow morning, and I'll come by that."

Reference to the Post Office Guide informed Sergeant Blewitt that Barnsley was in Yorkshire. He felt sure enough of the identity of the dead man by now to send a wire to the Barnsley police, asking them to break the news of his son's death to Henry Alcott of 10 Silver Lane.

2

Sir Alured Faversham reached Waterloo shortly before ten o'clock on Sunday morning. It was still freezing hard, and not many people were travelling. The vast station was almost deserted, and Sir Alured, having bought a first-class return ticket for Weyford, went to the book-stall to buy a paper to read on the journey.

He was waiting for his change, when he heard a voice at his elbow. "Hullo, Faversham! Didn't expect to meet you here. I thought I was the only unfortunate who had to travel in this weather."

Faversham turned sharply, and recognised Oldland. "Not coming my way, by any chance, are you?" the latter continued. "I've got to run across to Salisbury to see a patient. One of those women who always send for their London doctors when they're out of town. More money than sense."

"Just as well the money should find its way into your pocket," Faversham replied. "No, I'm not going your way, I'm afraid. I've got to go down to Weyford. Sorry, but I must dash off. My train leaves in a couple of minutes."

He hurried off to the platform, and took a seat in the train, which started soon afterwards. But he seemed unable to concentrate his attention upon his newspaper. For the greater part of the journey he stared out of the window, frowning thoughtfully.

Sergeant Blewitt was waiting on the platform at Weyford to meet him, and saluted respectfully. "It's very good of you to take all this trouble, Sir Alured," he said. "Doctor Gainsford is outside with his car. I told him you were coming down, and he said he would like to see you."

"Very good of Gainsford, I'm sure," Sir Alured replied. "I'm very sorry about this poor chap. You can tell me all about it later. We'd better get the identification over first."

They drove to the mortuary in which the body lay on a table, covered with a sheet. The place was unheated, and the temperature was below freezing. "The body is still frozen rigid," Doctor Gainsford explained, as he removed the sheet. "It still retains the position in which it was found, lying on the right side, at the extreme edge of the road."

Faversham nodded, and stared at the dead man's face. "Yes, that's Charles Alcott," he said slowly. "He hasn't changed much since I saw him last, six or seven years ago. I wonder what he was doing down here? Wanted to see me, I expect. What made you get in touch with me, Blewitt?"

"Excuse me, Sir Alured," Doctor Gainsford put in before the Sergeant could reply. "It's devilish cold here, and I take it we none of us want to hang about longer than we can help. I suggest we go back to my place in a minute or two, where it's warm, and Blewitt can tell you the whole story. But, while you are here, I'd be much obliged for your expert opinion. It'll carry more weight with the coroner than anything I can say."

Faversham smiled. "As to the cause of death? I think you're fully competent to decide that, Gainsford."

"It isn't every day I have a pathologist of your standing to consult. But in my opinion the man died of

exposure to severe cold. There are no injuries as far as one can tell."

Faversham rapidly examined the body, with a dexterity that came of long practice. "A typical case of death from cold," he said, as he replaced the sheet. "All the indications are present, and, as you say, there are no signs of external injury. But, all the same, I shouldn't be content to leave it at that, if I were you. I know how deceptive even the most obvious appearances may be. If you take my advice, you'll carry out a regular post-mortem, and eliminate all other possible causes of death. I'm assuming, of course, that the coroner has been informed, and approves."

"I've seen the coroner," Doctor Gainsford replied. "He proposes to hold an inquiry, without a jury, of course, to-morrow afternoon. Shall we get along, before we share the fate of this poor chap?"

Doctor Gainsford drove them back to his house, where they gathered round the fire in his consulting room. "Now, then, Blewitt, suppose you tell Sir Alured all about it," he said.

Thus prompted, the sergeant recounted the finding of the body, and the discoveries he had since made. "It was this piece of paper, with your name and address on it, sir, that made me ring you up," he concluded.

Faversham glanced at the scrap, and handed it back. "Somebody must have written that down for him," he said. "I wonder who it was? Not that that matters. The curious thing is that he came all the way down here. If he wanted to see me, why didn't he come to the laboratory in London? He knew that, well enough, since he worked there for a couple of years. For that matter, why didn't he write, instead of coming personally?"

"You have heard nothing of him since he left you, sir?" Blewitt asked.

"Not a word. In fact, I'd forgotten all about him till you rang up yesterday. Of course, I recognised him at once, when I saw him just now. I find it much easier to remember faces than names. I tried to recall what I could about him yesterday evening. He came to me first in answer to an advertisement, from some place in Yorkshire, I think it was. His references were excellent. But he was a very quiet sort of chap, and never spoke much about himself. He wasn't married then, I know. In fact, I seem to remember that he told me that the only relation he had living was his father."

"That's right, sir. I found a letter from his father in his pocket. Perhaps you'd like to see it, sir?"

Faversham glanced at the letter which Blewitt handed him. "H'm. Not a very highly educated man, evidently. I always hád an idea that Alcott had made his own way in the world. What's the address on this letter? Barnsley, that's the place! I remember now. Alcott left me to take up a job in a mining research bureau somewhere in the South Yorkshire coalfield. Have you taken any steps to get in touch with the old man?"

"I wired to Barnsley, sir, and this is the reply," said Blewitt, handing Faversham a telegram. This read:

"Houses in Silver Lane demolished two years ago stop Henry Alcott died in Union here February last stop no knowledge of any relations."

Faversham handed back the telegram. "Then Alcott didn't come from Barnsley to see me," he said. "Nor was he on his way to see his father. Besides, that letter was written some time ago, by the look of it. See how the paper is tearing at the folds. It must refer to the Christmas before last. I expect Alcott only carried it

about because it was the last letter his father wrote. There was no envelope with it, I suppose?"

"No, sir, there was no envelope," Blewitt replied. "I found the letter in his pocket folded just as it is now."

"And he only had a few coppers on him, you say? Yet he doesn't look as though he'd been tramping the roads for very long. I can't understand it, quite. Perhaps he had only just come to the end of his resources. I wouldn't have had this happen for the world."

The others kept silent, out of respect for Faversham's grief. And, after a pause, he continued. "I suppose that the poor fellow made his way to Markheys, thinking that I was there and would help him. As, indeed, I would have, gladly. And then, finding the house shut up, he tried to struggle on here. You don't think he was starving, do you, Gainsford?"

"Oh, no, I don't think that, Sir Alured," Doctor Gainsford replied to this sudden question. "There are no signs of emaciation. I should think rather that he was exhausted by a long tramp, and found the extra couple of miles into Weyford too much for him. The last straw, in fact. He probably sat down to rest by the roadside, and was overcome by sleep. The weather we had on Thursday evening would do the rest."

"I can't tell you how upset I am by this!" Faversham exclaimed. "I can't help feeling that if I had only been living at Markheys this wouldn't have happened. I could have found Alcott a job which would have tided him over the worst, easily enough. But I can't understand his being down and out like that. What were his clothes like?"

"Fairly good quality, I should say, sir," Blewitt replied. "And been looked after, too. His shirt had his name on it, for example. Everything clean, but worn literally into rags, sir."

on that string. We've got to consider the practical details. You say that there is to be an inquest to-morrow, Gainsford? It'll be confoundedly awkward if the coroner wants me to attend and give evidence. I've an appointment at the Home Office in the afternoon."

"I know the coroner very well," Doctor Gainsford replied. "His name is Dunkerly, and he lives only a few doors away. Would you like me to ring him up and ask him?"

"I'd be very grateful if you would," said Faversham.

Doctor Gainsford went to the telephone, and returned with a self-satisfied expression. "I explained the difficulty to Dunkerly," he announced. "He quite understood. And he asked me to tell you, Sir Alured, that if you care to go round and see him now, he thinks that something might be arranged."

"I'll go and see him willingly enough," Faversham replied. "Perhaps we'd better all go, in case Mr. Dunkerly has any questions to ask."

They walked the short distance to the coroner's house, and were promptly admitted. Mr. Dunkerly was evidently much impressed by Faversham's importance. "Your name is, of course, a household word, Sir Alured," he said, as they were introduced. "Until now, however, I have not had the privilege of meeting you. Doctor Gainsford tells me that you have been able to identify the poor fellow found by the roadmen yesterday?"

"Yes, unfortunately," Faversham replied. "He is an old laboratory assistant of mine, by name Charles Alcott."

"Dear me! How very distressing for you, Sir Alured. I understand from what you have already told me, Sergeant, that other evidence of the man's identity exists beyond Sir Alured's statement."

"That is so, sir," Blewitt replied. "I found the man's name marked on the collar-band of his shirt, and a letter from his father in his pocket."

"Just so, just so!" said the coroner. "Well, under the circumstances, Sir Alured, I think we should be justified in stretching a point. It would be ridiculous to ask you to interrupt your most important duties for such a trifling thing as this. Most fortunately, I happen to be a Commissioner for Oaths. If you will be good enough to write out a statement to the effect that you have seen the dead man, and can identify him as Charles Alcott, deceased, I will administer the oath, and that will be sufficient. I will accept your sworn statement as evidence to-morrow."

This formality was carried out, and Faversham, having warmly thanked the coroner, left his house. Doctor Gainsford gave him a pressing invitation to lunch, but he excused himself. "Thanks very much, but I'd rather get myself a bite of bread and cheese somewhere," he said. "While I'm down here, I may as well walk over to Markheys and see that everything is in order."

"But why walk?" exclaimed the doctor. "I should be only too pleased to drive you over."

"That's very good of you, Gainsford, but I'd rather walk," Faversham replied firmly. "It will do me good. I find it almost impossible to get enough exercise in London. But there's one thing you might do for me, if you'll be so good."

"I should be only too delighted to do anything in my power for you, Sir Alured," replied the doctor effusively. The rule that prophets are without honour in their own country evidently did not apply to a man of Faversham's eminence, so far as his home town was concerned.

"Well, I'll take you at your word," said Faversham. "I don't like the idea of that poor chap having a

pauper's funeral. I wish you would see the undertakers for me. Being Sunday, I can't do it myself. Ask them to provide a decent coffin, with a plate with his name on it, and that sort of thing. Tell them to see that everything is done decently, and to send the bill in to me. Will that be too much trouble?"

"It'll be no trouble at all, Sir Alured. I will see the undertakers first thing to-morrow morning, and give them your instructions. Are you sure you won't change your mind, and stay to lunch?"

But Faversham was adamant, and took his leave of Doctor Gainsford and the sergeant. He went to see Mrs. Waller, had a few words with her, and borrowed the keys of Markheys. Then he walked the two miles at a good swinging pace, inspected the spot where Alcott's body had been found, and let himself into the house. He spent an hour or so there, looking round, then walked back to Weyford, where he gave the keys back to Mrs. Waller and took an afternoon train back to London.

The inquest, which took place next day at Weyford police station, was a very quiet affair. The finding of Alcott's body had aroused no particular interest, and the only representative of the public was the reporter of the *Weyford and County Standard.* The witnesses were George Stickland and the man who had actually found the body, Doctor Gainsford, and Sergeant Blewitt.

George and his mate described the finding of the body, and the action they had taken. The coroner, who had seen no necessity to summon a jury, asked them a few questions and dismissed them. Doctor Gainsford then gave his evidence. A preliminary examination had led him to the conclusion that the deceased had died as the result of exposure to extreme cold.

"Acting upon your instructions, sir, I subsequently carried out a complete examination. I may say that, on

the advice of Sir Alured Faversham, whose experience of such matters is very great, I made a more exhaustive examination than might have appeared necessary."

"Quite so, quite so," said the coroner approvingly. "The advice of a man like Sir Alured could not lightly be disregarded."

"So I felt, sir. Upon opening the body, I found certain characteristic appearances. Small extravasations of blood were present under the epithelium of the gastric mucous membrane, and the heart was distended with blood of a bright red colour. On the exposed surfaces of the body, that is to say the face and hands, there were certain cherry-red spots, or rather stains."

"And in your opinion, doctor, these appearances point to death from the cause which you have mentioned?"

"They are characteristic of death from exposure to extreme cold, sir."

"And you found nothing which suggested a possible alternative cause of death? No injuries of any kind, for instance?"

"Nothing whatever, sir. The body was quite uninjured, externally and internally. The organs were perfectly normal, and were those of a healthy man. Further, the deceased was well-nourished. By this I do not mean that he possessed superfluous fat, but that there were no symptoms of emaciation. It would appear, however, that he had not partaken of food for some hours before his death."

"Thank you, Doctor Gainsford. Now, Sergeant Blewitt, I should like to hear your statement."

Blewitt produced his documents and the dead man's shirt, and told his story. The coroner listened to him, nodding his head at intervals. He seemed perfectly satisfied, and much impressed by the marking on the shirt.

"That, then, concludes the evidence I have to hear," he said. "I may say that the deceased has been identified by no less a person than Sir Alured Faversham. His identification is in agreement with the evidence given by Sergeant Blewitt. In his sworn statement, which I have before me, he declares that he has recognised the deceased as Charles Alcott, about thirty-five years of age, and formerly employed by him as a laboratory assistant.

"This unfortunate affair can easily be explained. The deceased, whom we must assume had made his way to the vicinity of Markheys in order to interview Sir Alured Faversham, his previous employer, was overcome by exhaustion. He lay, or fell, by the side of the road, and quickly succumbed to the effects of the severe frost.

"Nor is it difficult to estimate very closely the time when this must have happened. Had the deceased been lying by the roadside before dusk on the 18th, he would almost certainly have been seen by some passer-by. Again, since the body was found beneath the snow-drift, it must have been in position before the snow began to fall, about seven o'clock that evening. Do you consider it possible to fix the time of death with greater exactitude, Doctor Gainsford?"

"I do not, sir. Deceased no doubt fell asleep, a phenomenon nearly always induced in those exposed to extreme cold. It is impossible to say how long after this death actually ensued. But the period which elapsed was probably short."

"Just so! just so! We may place it on record that the deceased died during the evening of Thursday, the 18th. Death was clearly due to misadventure, and the cause of it has been established beyond a doubt. I shall record a verdict accordingly."

Thus ended the inquest. The funeral took place next

morning at Weyford cemetery. It was still bitterly cold and freezing hard, and there were no mourners. The undertaker had carried out Faversham's instructions, and provided a handsome oak coffin. Such was the end of the unfortunate Charles Alcott.

3

On the following Wednesday, January 24th, Oldland dined with Dr. Priestley at Westbourne Terrace. A very unusual case which Oldland had attended formed the topic of discussion during the meal, and continued while they drank their coffee subsequently.

" I felt all the time that it was hopeless," Oldland said as he put down his cup. " I suppose all doctors get cases like that from time to time. But when I come across one, it has the most depressing effect upon me. It makes me feel that we haven't got any forrader since the time of Hippocrates. All our science, all the means we have at our disposal, seem utterly futile. One sees one's patient dying before one's eyes, in spite of all one's efforts, and it's not a pleasant experience."

" The whisky is on the table at your elbow," Dr. Priestley remarked. " Help yourself. Which particular complication was actually responsible for your patient's death?"

" Tetanus, I fancy," Oldland replied, as he mixed himself a drink. " I inoculated him, of course, as soon as I noticed the first symptoms, but it had absolutely no effect. Nothing I could do seemed to be of the slightest use. But there! I've bored you enough already with my troubles. The mention of tetanus reminds me of Hinchliffe and the Venner case. I've heard nothing of that girl lately. I suppose your interest in the affair has cooled long ago?"

"Cooled? Yes, I think that is a suitable expression. But my interest in a problem never entirely vanishes so long as that problem remains unsolved. In this case I have kept a file open, in which to record any further information. But during the last few weeks only one note has been added to it."

"May one inquire what that note was about?" Oldland inquired.

"Certainly. On November 27th last I paid a visit to Venner's office, and interviewed his secretary, Miss Loveday. I must confess to having employed a harmless artifice to account for my visit. I succeeded in gaining Miss Loveday's confidence, to a certain extent, and told her that my advice was at her disposal should she find herself in any difficulty."

Oldland grinned. "I'm surprised at you, at your time of life, Priestley," he said. "I shall begin to suspect that you're as bad as that old lawyer chap you told me about. Go ahead."

"My interest in Miss Loveday was hardly personal. On the morning of December 21st she telephoned to me, and as a result of our conversation, she came to see me here that evening. She was very anxious for my advice upon what she should do. She had the offer of an appointment with a firm of merchants, which she must definitely either refuse or accept before the New Year. She had heard nothing of Mr. Venner, and despaired of his return. What should she do?

"I told her that I thought it highly improbable that Venner would return, now that so long an interval had elapsed. My suggestion was that she should write to Miss Venner, telling her that she proposed to terminate her engagement, and asking her to appoint someone to whom she could hand over the office and its contents. This she did. Miss Venner appointed her solicitor, Mr.

Coleforth, and he, presumably, is now administering the business."

"Expecting it to revert to the fair Christine, one supposes," Oldland remarked. "But I think you were right. Venner won't turn up now, after all this time. I wonder what has happened to him? I haven't so much faith in my original theory as I had. If he'd lost his memory or anything like that, he'd have been identified by now."

Before Dr. Priestley could reply the door opened and the parlourmaid announced Sir Alured Faversham. "I've taken advantage of your invitation to drop in any evening I liked, Priestley," he said. "You can tell me to clear out if I'm in the way. Good-evening, Oldland. I thought it quite possible that I should run into you."

"I am very glad to see you, Faversham," Doctor Priestley replied. "Mary, bring in the decanter of sherry, will you, please? You know where the cigars are kept, Faversham."

"Thanks very much," Faversham said, as he walked across to the cabinet and selected a cigar. "You're one of the most hospitable people I know. Beastly cold still, isn't it? By the way, I suppose that Oldland has told you that we met for a moment last Sunday morning?"

"No, I meant to tell him, but my tongue ran away with me, and I forgot," Oldland said. "I guessed what your business was at Weyford when I saw that paragraph in the paper this morning."

"Paragraph in the paper!" Faversham exclaimed sharply. "What are you talking about, Oldland?"

"You're so used to being in the news, that a little thing like that would escape you. Besides your tastes are too highbrow to allow you to read the *Daily Bugle*. Mine aren't. I read the rag every morning, every page

of it, and enjoy it. That's where I saw your name this morning. I cut out the paragraph to show Priestley, who never read anything but *The Times*, I know. What did I do with it? Ah, here it is."

He produced a newspaper cutting from his pocket and read it aloud. "Laboratory Assistant's fate. Among the victims of the present wintry spell must be numbered Charles Alcott, a laboratory assistant. The unfortunate man was discovered frozen to death by men engaged in clearing the snow from a road in the vicinity of Weyford, Hampshire. At the inquest, it was stated that the body had been identified by Sir Alured Faversham, the eminent pathologist, and that Alcott had at one time been employed by him as his assistant."

"It's marvellous what trifles the newspapers find space for," said Faversham. "Yes, that paragraph is correct in essentials. The local police found a piece of paper with my address on it, and rang me up. They knew who the fellow was already. There was never any doubt about it. His shirt was marked with his name, for one thing. But they asked me to go down and make sure."

"Was Alcott a native of Weyford?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"No, he was a native of Barnsley in Yorkshire, but it seems that he had not come direct from there. I had completely lost sight of the poor chap since he left me, seven years ago. From all appearances, he must have fallen upon evil days, and hearing that I lived near Weyford, came to look me up. But there was no clue to where he had come from."

"Turned up from nowhere, eh?" Oldland remarked. "By jove, that's the exact converse to the case of Venner. Venner disappears into the fourth dimension, and your man Alcott appears from it, just as mysteriously!"

"Oh, damn Venner!" Faversham exclaimed. "You and Priestley have Venner on the brain. I hoped we had all forgotten that not very enthralling incident long ago. Upon my word, Oldland, you're quite capable of suggesting that Alcott was really Venner in disguise. You want all your incidents nicely rounded off for you, like a book. But unfortunately, our experience tells us that things aren't like that. We rarely see the complete story, only one phase of it. The beginning or the end is always missing. I shall never know the circumstances which brought Alcott to Weyford, and you will never know what happened to Venner."

"There's a lot of truth in that," replied Oldland. "But really, you know, I wasn't going to suggest that the vanished Venner had reappeared in the guise of Alcott. What I meant to imply was that there seems to be some hidden realm of space, from which some people can appear and into which others can disappear. You were going down to identify the poor chap when we met at Waterloo, I suppose?"

Faversham nodded. "I would have told you all about it then, if I had had time. Yes, I went down and saw him in the mortuary, frozen stiff, and I recognised him. Has it ever struck you, Priestley, that recognition is a queer thing?"

"Identification is always surrounded with difficulties," Dr. Priestley replied. "Had you any difficulty in recognising this man Alcott?"

"Not the slightest, although before I saw him I wondered if I should know him again. I'm always amazed when I hear people in the witness box swear to recognising somebody whom they only knew slightly, and that maybe a dozen years ago. And as we all know, cases of mistaken identity occur every day."

Faversham helped himself to a glass of sherry, and drew his chair nearer to the fire. "It's an uncom-

monly interesting subject," he continued. "And it's one that all three of us must come up against fairly frequently. Take this case of Alcott, for example. The local sergeant, whom I've known ever since I went to live at Markheys, rang me up on Saturday afternoon. His first question was, did I know anybody of the name of Charles Alcott?

"Now, the name produced an immediate response in my brain. It had a familiar ring. Charles Alcott. Yes, I was perfectly familiar with the name. But I could not at once link it up with the individual to whom it belonged. Then the associations attached to the name began to appear. I had a mental picture of my laboratory. Then, and not till then, I remembered that Charles Alcott was the name of a laboratory assistant who had left me seven years ago. You understand that I'm trying to explain my mental processes?"

"Your explanation of them is most lucid," Dr. Priestley replied. "Did you, at the same time, acquire an impression of Alcott's appearance?"

"No, most certainly I did not. I'm coming to that part of it. The next thing, Blewitt—that's the sergeant—asked me, was, would I come down and identify him? I said I would, but after I had rung off, I half-regretted my promise. Should I recognise the man again when I saw him? With sufficient certainty, that is, to swear to his identity?

"I don't mind telling you, Priestley, I got quite worried over it. The position, when I examined it, was this. Alcott had been with me for about three years. So far as I could remember, there had never been anything very striking about his appearance. I had seen him every day of the week. He had been a perfectly familiar spectacle to me. If anyone had changed places with him, I should have spotted it at once. And yet—

I had never taken any particular notice of the chap. I wonder if you know what I mean?"

Both Dr. Priestley and Oldland nodded comprehendingly, and Faversham continued.

"The point was, should I recognise him after an interval of seven years? I very much doubted it. I had completely forgotten what he looked like. The question I asked myself was this. If I passed him unexpectedly in the street should I recognise him? And I felt pretty certain that I should not.

"What I'm trying to point out is that our recollection of people depends entirely upon the circumstances under which we have known them, and not upon any degree of intimacy. I had worked in the same room as Alcott for three years. But he had had no particular significance for me. He was my assistant, as much a part of the laboratory as the bench or the apparatus standing upon it. But nothing had ever happened to draw my attention to him particularly.

"We don't seem able to keep off the subject of that confounded fellow Venner. He will serve as an example to illustrate what I mean. I saw Venner once, for a period of an hour or so, at the inquest on his uncle's body. There was nothing striking about Venner's appearance, either. But on that one occasion I studied the man. He interested me, because, I suppose, I felt a sort of protective instinct towards him. I knew jolly well that, but for my evidence, he would probably have been arrested on a charge of murder.

"Now, what is the result? I have a very vivid mental picture of Venner. I could give you now a very accurate description of his appearance. I should know him anywhere, the moment I set eyes upon him. And I feel that in seven years time my recollection of him will be just as sharp. If you like to put it that way, Venner is one of the people whose appearances are definitely

photographed upon my brain. We all have a mental gallery of photographs like that, I expect. And it doesn't follow, because a person is among them, that that person has exercised any influence upon our lives."

"You are quite right there, Faversham," Oldland remarked. "I can remember all sorts of people whom I've only met casually once or twice."

"And have forgotten dozens of others who were at one time perfectly familiar, I have no doubt. Anyhow, that's what happens in my case. Alcott, now. On Saturday evening I couldn't have given you the vaguest description of him to save my life. Medium size, slight build, about twenty-five when he came to me, therefore, about thirty-five now. That's absolutely all. Might apply to Venner himself, and to millions of other people for that matter.

"Well, I went down to Weyford, and in spite of my misgivings, I recognised Alcott at once. His appearance came back to me in a flash, the moment I set eyes upon him. But this is the point I want to make. My recognition of him depended upon the form in which the question presented itself. In effect, I was asked, 'Is this Charles Alcott?' and I was able to reply with certainty, 'Yes, it is.' My memory of him returned as soon as I saw him."

"With sufficient force to eliminate the possibility of the body being that of someone else?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"With sufficient force to justify me in taking an oath that the body was that of Alcott. But had the question been put to me in the usual form in which it arises when identification is required, the reaction of my memory would not, I think, have been so rapid. You know the usual police procedure. A man is in custody, on a charge of housebreaking, say. A witness is found, who saw a man entering the house in question. The

issue then arises, is the man in custody the man seen by the witness?

"What happens? The prisoner is paraded, along with a dozen others chosen at random. The witness is asked, 'Are any of these the man you saw entering the house?' And that is an amazingly difficult question to answer. Ask your friend Superintendent Hanslet, and he will tell you that if the test is carried out in good faith, by which I mean without any prompting of the witness, it fails as often as it succeeds.

"And I don't wonder at it. Take the case of Alcott and myself. Suppose the circumstances had been different. Suppose I had been shown a dozen living men, Alcott among them. I say living, because it is much easier to identify a man when he is dead than it is when he is alive. We recognise people as much by their habitual expression as anything else, and a living man can change his expression, whereas a dead man can't. Had I been asked, 'Do you know any of these men?' I should have pointed to Alcott and replied. 'That man's face is very familiar to me.' I should have known immediately that at one time I had continually seen him.

"I should then have been asked, 'Who is he?' And to that question I might not have been able to give an immediate reply. It might have taken me some time to link up the familiarity of the face with the personality of its owner. I should have had to have gone through a series of scenes, as it were. Markheys? No, the face did not fit in with those surroundings. My club? No. Any of the numerous inquests which I have attended? No. And so I should have gone on till I came to my laboratory. Then a picture would have flashed into my brain. The man I saw before me washing test-tubes at the sink, perhaps. Then I could have replied, 'That man used to be my laboratory assistant.' 'His name,'

'I can't remember. Let me think. Yes, I have it, Alcott, Charles Alcott.' And not until then would the identification have been complete."

"You put that jolly well, Faversham," said Oldland. "Especially the point about linking up a familiar face with its owner. There's a shop close to my house into which I go at least once a week to buy tobacco. The same man always serves me. I haven't the slightest idea of his name, but he's always in his shirt-sleeves, with about half an inch of cigarette end in the corner of his mouth. If he wasn't in the shop, I should notice it at once. But if I met him in the rôle of chief mourner at a funeral, with a frock coat and top-hat, I shouldn't be able to place him. I could only say that his face was vaguely familiar to me."

"The subject of recognition is certainly a difficult one," Dr. Priestley observed. "But I take it, Faversham, that had you been asked to identify this man Alcott without his name having been mentioned, you would eventually have done so?"

"Yes, by the process I have just described, and my identification would have been just as certain. But it would not have been convincing to the spectators, in this case, Sergeant Blewitt. The moral effect of identification at first sight is far greater than that of identification after a period of consideration. Hesitation of any kind always suggests a possible element of doubt. In this case, there was no room for doubt. My recognition of the man was instantaneous."

"Rather a pity, in a way," Oldland remarked. "From Priestley's point of view, I mean. Look at the chance he would have had if you hadn't been able to identify him! An unknown man buried beneath a snow-drift! You know quite well that he wouldn't have rested until he had found out who he was."

Faversham laughed. "I dare say you're right," he

said. " I've saved him that trouble, anyway. No, there's no mystery about poor Alcott's death, I'm afraid. Just one of those tragedies that might so easily have been avoided. If he'd only written to me, before taking that last journey to Weyford! I'd have helped him out, and I expect my influence would have found him a job somewhere. Instead of that . . ."

He broke off suddenly and poured himself out another glass of sherry. " There's something about the atmosphere of this room that leads one to speculation, Priestley," he continued. " And in this case the speculation isn't particularly cheerful. What were that poor chap's feelings during his last hours of consciousness, I wonder? There seems very little doubt that he had been to Markheys to see me. Can't you imagine the bitterness of his disappointment when he found the place shut up? Out of a job, nothing but a few coppers in his pocket, night coming on, and his last hope gone! Did he really stop for a rest, meaning to struggle on when he felt stronger? Or did he deliberately lay himself down there to wait for the end? I wonder!"

" Is there a workhouse at Weyford?" asked Oldland, unsympathetically.

Faversham turned on him. " Oh, yes, I know! Nobody need starve, or go without a night's lodging, in this marvellous civilisation of ours. Are suicides any less frequent, because of that? Your smug assumption is all very well, Oldland. But there are still lots of people who would prefer a painless death to seeking the hospitality of the casual ward. And Alcott, I fancy, would have been one of these."

" But there is usually an alternative to the casual ward," said Dr. Priestley, anxious to preserve the peace. " A man of Alcott's age—you said, I think, that he was about thirty-five—must surely have had some friends or relations?"

"Apparently he had not," Faversham replied. "He was a native of Barnsley, in Yorkshire, and Sergeant Blewitt made inquiries there. His only relation seems to have been his father, and he died a year ago. And since he died in a charitable institution, it is not to be supposed that Alcott's relations, even had they existed, could have done much for him."

"You think that he had determined to apply to you for assistance?" said Dr. Priestley. "Very probably, under the circumstances, especially if he was in the neighbourhood of Weyford. But how did he know that you had taken a lease of Markheys? You had not done so seven years ago."

"Oh, somebody told him, I suppose. As I think I told you just now, he had a piece of paper with the Markheys address on it. He may have heard by chance that I was living in the district and got somebody to give him the address. Oh, well, it's a rotten business altogether, and I wish I could get it out of my mind. Yarning to you two about it won't help matters. Best thing I can do is to get back to the flat. I've got some letters to write, and I shan't have time in the morning."

He finished his sherry and said good-night.

4

Oldland glanced at the clock as Dr. Priestley returned after seeing Faversham out. "It's early yet," he said "May I stop a bit longer, or would you rather that I followed Faversham's example and went home?"

"I hope you will not go just yet," Dr. Priestley replied. "As you know, I prefer not to go to bed too early."

"Then I'll help myself to another whisky, if I may.

Faversham seems a bit cut up about that poor fellow Alcott, doesn't he?"

"Because, I think, he feels that he is indirectly to blame. If he had been living at Markheys the man would not have died. It is utterly illogical, of course, but we are often inclined to blame ourselves for events entirely beyond our control. I have a distant recollection of the man, though I could not describe him. I have been in the habit of visiting Faversham's laboratory for many years, at infrequent intervals."

"Faversham's analysis of the processes of indentification was pretty shrewd. I think he's right. It isn't always easy to recognise people, by any means. Do you think you would have recognised Alcott, if you had been asked to?"

Dr. Priestley shook his head. "I think it very doubtful," he replied. "I can only have seen him half a dozen times, and I never knew his name. To me he was merely Faversham's assistant. Following the process of thought which Faversham described to us, I should probably have been able to say where I had seen him. Faversham, of course, could identify the body with certainty."

"He wouldn't have sworn to him, if he hadn't been absolutely sure. He's a cautious chap, is Faversham. You know, I never really meant to suggest for a moment that the body was that of Venner. It couldn't have been, of course. I was only trying to pull Faversham's leg."

"Faversham has no taste for a problem which does not directly concern him. But why, apart from his identification of the body, could it not have been that of Venner?"

"Because of the circumstances. Venner cannot have been wandering about the country all this time, unless my original theory is right, and he had lost his

memory. Who would wander about with only a few coppers in their pocket, when they need not? And if he had lost his memory, and was wandering aimlessly, he would have attracted attention and been recognised before this."

After some further desultory conversation, Oldland finished his last whisky and soda, and went home.

But Dr. Priestley's mind still ran upon what Faversham had told him of the circumstances of Alcott's death. He had said that there was no mystery about it. That might be so. But there were certain features of it which had aroused his interest. And as Harold Merefield had once said in confidence, when he once got his teeth into a thing, it was a devil of a job to make him let go.

Alcott's death has been satisfactorily explained. The mystery, if any existed, did not lie there. It lay in Alcott's behaviour during the days preceding it. Where had he come from, that Thursday evening? Were his circumstances really so desperate as appearances seemed to indicate? If so, why had he not applied earlier to Faversham for assistance? Was it conceivable that the idea had not occurred to him until he learnt by chance that Faversham lived in the neighbourhood of Weyford? In fact was the explanation that Faversham, and apparently everybody concerned, had so readily accepted, the correct one?

Hardly a matter worth worrying about, Dr. Priestley assured himself. Alcott was dead, and there was an end to it.

However, a few days later, Dr. Priestley had occasion to spend a night in Southsea. An old colleague of his lived there, an expert in a branch of knowledge in which Dr. Priestley was at the moment interested. The object of his visit was to obtain confirmation of certain scientific facts which he was gathering for an article

which was to appear in one of the learned journals. And on looking up the train by which he was to return to London, he saw that it stopped at Weyford.

Even then, he did not make up his mind. He entered the train, and opened his copy of *The Times*. But his normal powers of concentration failed him. He found that his eyes followed the wording without conveying its meaning to his brain. And when the train pulled up at Weyford, he got out, deposited his luggage in the cloakroom, and walked into the town.

He inquired his way to the police station, and when he reached it, asked to see Sergeant Blewitt. The sergeant appeared, and Dr. Priestley introduced himself. "I am a friend of Sir Alured Faversham, who has told me of the death of his late assistant, Charles Alcott," he said simply. "I am wondering whether it would be possible for me to see the documents which were found in the dead man's pocket?"

"I don't see any objection to that, sir, since you are a friend of Sir Alured's," replied Blewitt. "If you don't mind waiting a minute, I'll fetch them. We're keeping everything of Alcott's, in case somebody should turn up to fetch them."

Blewitt went out and returned shortly with the two pieces of paper. The first that Dr. Priestley picked up was the one with Faversham's name and address on it. This piece of paper was tough, and of excellent quality. It had been torn into a roughly circular shape, cutting off the last letter of the address. It was comparatively clean, only slightly soiled, and that on the side bearing the writing. The reverse was not soiled at all.

The writing was certainly in a feminine hand, and an educated one at that. A broad-nibbed pen had been employed, and good black ink. From the appearance of the ink, Dr. Priestley came to the conclusion that the writing was not of very recent date. It was impossible

to tell with any accuracy, but he judged that it was at least two or three months old.

He laid down the first piece of paper, and took up the second. This was a piece of cheap note-paper, folded in four.

It was very dirty, and the paper was beginning to tear along the folds, suggesting that it had been carried loose in the pocket for some considerable time.

The writing, as well as the matter, was that of an uneducated man, as though the hand had been infirm. The ink was of the commonest possible variety, and had faded to such an extent that the writing was in places almost illegible. This was especially the case with the address at the head of the letter and the signature. Some of the letters in both were hardly decipherable.

The body of the letter had not faded so badly. In fact, it looked as though it had been written with a firmer hand, or with a slightly better quality ink. The difference was not marked, but just enough for Dr. Priestley's keen eyes to discern it.

Sergeant Blewitt grinned as he watched Dr. Priestley peering at the letter through his glasses. " Bit hard to make out, isn't it, sir?" he remarked.

" It is, indeed," Dr. Priestley replied. " I have never known even cheap inks fade like this. I could almost believe that the writing fluid employed was ink diluted with water." He suddenly held the paper to his nose and sniffed it. " Has this letter been disinfected?" he asked.

" Disinfected!" exclaimed Blewitt. " Why, no, sir. Why should it have been?"

" I thought perhaps that disinfection was part of normal police routine. And certain disinfecting agents might cause the ink to fade in this way."

Blewitt shook his head. " No, sir, it hasn't been dis-

infected. Besides it was all faded like that when I found it."

"Very curious," said Dr. Priestley. He stared intently at the letter for a long time, then laid it aside. "I think you are quite right to keep these documents," he said. "They might possibly have a sentimental value to a relative of Alcott. A notice of his death appeared in some of the papers, I believe. Have you had any communications on the subject?"

"None whatever, sir. It looks as if the poor chap hadn't a friend or relation in the world. We know that his father has been dead for a year, and Sir Alured didn't think that he had any other relations, sir."

"So he told me. And it seems most probable, or he would certainly have applied to them for help. Have you discovered where he slept the night before his death?"

"Why, no, sir, we haven't. He was probably lodging somewhere about. Spent the last of his money on a bed and a bite of something to eat, I expect. Doctor Gainsford thought that he hadn't had anything to eat since the morning."

"Have you any reason to suppose that the man was tramping from place to place?" Dr. Priestley asked. "Is it not quite possible that he was living somewhere in the vicinity, and walked to Markheys with the intention of returning when he had seen Sir Alured? In that case, he may have had belongings other than those found on his body."

"Well, to tell you the truth, sir, I never thought of that," Blewitt replied, in a tone of some bewilderment. Then, gaining confidence, he continued. "But it's not very likely, sir. For in that case he must have been lodging with somebody. And we should have been sure to have heard, if he had been. There was a full account in last week's *Weyford Standard,* a couple of

columns of it. I'll give you a copy of the paper, if you like, sir. Sir Alured might like to see it."

He produced the paper, and Dr. Priestley thanked him in suitable terms. "I am sure Sir Alured will be interested to see this," he said. "But I hardly see the force of your objection. Alcott must, in any case, have been lodging with somebody on the night before his death. How is it that that person has not communicated with you?"

"They mightn't so much as have known his name, sir. It's like this. If a man's on the road, and doesn't want to go into the casual ward, there's always folk to be found who'll take him in for the night for a shilling or so, and no questions asked. Likely as not, it's no more than a chair in the kitchen, and a cup of tea and a slice of bread in the morning. A person like that wouldn't have asked Alcott his name. But if he had been lodging regular anywhere, it would be different, sir."

"Yes, I see what you mean," said Dr. Priestley, who had been glancing through the report in the newspaper. "The time at which Alcott must have lain or sat down by the roadside seems fairly definitely established. He is not likely to have done so before dark, or he would probably have been noticed by passers-by."

"That's so, sir, though there aren't many that use that road, now Sir Alured and his family are away. But Mrs. Waller, who goes to Markheys every day to work, passed along the road between half-past three and four, and he wasn't there then."

"I see. And what time did it begin to snow?"

"Round about seven o'clock, sir. Maybe a bit later, nearer half-past. It was snowing pretty hard by then, I know. I can show you the spot where the body was

found on this map, sir. This was the place, just outside the gates of Markheys."

Dr. Priestley studied the map intently. Then, with many thanks to Sergeant Blewitt for his kind offices, he left the police station. But he did not go back to the railway. He set off along the road which led to Markheys, the situation of which he had discovered from the map shown him by Blewitt.

It was Thursday, February 1st, a fortnight since the date of Alcott's death. A thaw had followed the frost, and the weather was quite warm and sunny. But though in the open the snow had completely disappeared, patches of dirty white in the shade served as a reminder of the severity of the storm. The road was certainly lonely. Dr. Priestley met nobody. And when he came to a secluded spot he opened the copy of the *Weyford Standard* which Blewitt had given him, and read the very full account of the finding of the body and the proceedings at the inquest.

This done, he walked on towards Markheys, thinking deeply. It was not until he reached the gate that he began to look about him. He recognised the cutting described in the newspaper report, and was able to identify fairly accurately the spot where the body had been found. Nothing beyond a few patches of snow remained of the drift that had filled the road.

At the gate itself he paused. He could see the house through the leafless trees which surrounded it. It looked solid, comfortable, and not in the least pretentious. No wonder Faversham hated being compelled to leave it, for his comparatively cramped quarters in Margaret Street!

Yielding to a sudden impulse, Dr. Priestley opened the gate and walked up the drive. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and a peaceful quiet reigned among the trees. The house, when he reached it, wore

the desolate air that unoccupied houses can never escape. The curtains were drawn across the windows, the flower-beds round the lawn were untended, weeds were growing by the front door. Dr. Priestley went round to the back door, which he found open. He knocked upon it sharply.

After a few moments, Mrs. Waller appeared, wiping her hands upon her apron. She looked very much astonished at the appearance of the stranger, but Dr. Priestley introduced himself at once. "I am a friend of Sir Alured, Mrs. Waller," he said pleasantly. "He told me that he might be down here one day this week, and as I happened to be in Weyford, I thought I would walk over on the chance that he might be here to-day."

"Won't you step inside, sir?" Mrs. Waller replied. "But Sir Alured isn't here to-day. He's only been down once since he and her ladyship went away last year, and that was the Sunday before last, the day after that poor fellow Alcott was found."

Dr. Priestley allowed Mrs. Waller to show him into the kitchen. "I only came over on chance," he said. "It being a very pleasant afternoon, I thought that a walk would do me good. Sir Alured told me about Alcott. A very sad affair, very sad, indeed. You know, Mrs. Waller, I have never been here before, though Sir Alured has often invited me to stay with him. It looks an extremely nice house, from the outside."

"It is a nice house, sir. Perhaps you would like to see over it while you're here? Sir Alured wouldn't mind, I'm sure."

"No, I am sure he would not mind," Dr. Priestley replied. "If it is not taking up too much of your time, I should very much like to see the principal rooms."

Mrs. Waller led the way through the baize-covered door which separated the back premises from the rest

of the house. They found themselves in a wide hall, with a staircase leading to a gallery above, and rooms leading off it. These they inspected in turn, Mrs. Waller drawing the curtains and revealing the furniture covered with dust-sheets. And at length they came to a locked door.

"That leads into the wing that Sir Alured had built when he came here, sir," Mrs. Waller explained. "There's a garage there, where Sir Alured keeps the car, and a workshop. And there's a room that he calls his abbortory, or some name like that, sir. It's where he does his experiments, so her ladyship told me. I can't show you in there, sir, for Sir Alured has got the key. It's the only thing he left locked when he went away, sir. He told me it was because there were poisons and dangerous things like that in the abbortory, and it wouldn't be safe for anybody to get to them. Excuse me, sir, but I think I hear somebody knocking at the back door."

She bustled off, and Dr. Priestley followed her more leisurely. He was in time to overhear her conversation with her visitor. A man's voice first. "Good-afternoon, Mrs. Waller, I thought I'd catch you here about this time. I've come to read the electric meter. Bit late, I know, but with the weather we've had I didn't fancy riding out here before. No harm done, though. There can't have been much current used, since Sir Alured has been away all the quarter."

"There's been none used, bar a light in the kitchen of a dark afternoon," Mrs. Waller replied. "And maybe I've turned one on in the passages now and then, just to see my way about, like. But I'm main careful of the light. 'Tis too expensive to go wasting of it. You know where the meter is. In the cupboard under the back stairs."

Dr. Priestley had noticed, as he approached the house,

a line of poles, bearing electric light wires, leading to to it. Even in the depths of the country, he reflected, Faversham had every convenience at his disposal. It was a thousand pities that he had been so hard hit by the Carne Trust crash. To have to give up Markheys permanently would be a very bitter blow to him.

Even from his rapid view of the place, Dr. Priestley could tell that Faversham must have spent a lot of money on it. Probably so much that any decrease in his income must be a very serious matter to him. And he had expensive tastes, there was no doubt of that. The addition of a new wing must have been no small item in itself.

Faversham had told him about the laboratory, or the abbortory, as Mrs. Waller called it, he remembered. It had been held out as a bait for him to come and stay. He would have accepted Faversham's repeated invitations long before this, but for Lady Faversham. A charming woman, no doubt. Dr. Priestley had nothing against her, except that she never stopped talking, in season or out. Dr. Priestley knew that any serious conversation with Faversham would be impossible if she were under the same roof. But he would like to have peeped into the laboratory. Faversham had given him a very interesting outline of some experiments which he had been carrying on there.

His meditations were interrupted by the sound of Mrs. Waller's voice. "Well, you've finished, then? You'll be getting on now, I suppose?"

"Yes, I've read the meter. But you've been burning a lot more current than you thought for, Mrs. Waller. There's seven hundred and thirty-six units gone since the meter was read last October."

"Seven hundred and thirty-six units?" repeated Mrs. Waller suspiciously. "What's that?"

There was a pause, during which the inspector appar-

ently made a rapid calculation. "It's twenty-seven pounds twelve at ninepence a unit, and that's what Sir Alured pays," he replied.

"I've never used as much as that!" exclaimed Mrs. Waller indignantly. "Your blessed old meter's gone wrong, that's what it is. And whenever they goes wrong, it's to the company's benefit, I've noticed."

"There's nothing wrong with the meter, that I can see. The account will go in to Sir Alured, and if he complains, we'll have it tested. That's all I can do about it. Good-day to you, Mrs. Waller."

Mrs. Waller muttered something, and bustled back to find Dr. Priestley. "'Twas the man to read the electric light, sir," she explained. "And he says that I must have burnt twenty-seven pounds worth in the last three months. It's ridiculous, sir, that's what it is. I don't know, I'm sure, what Sir Alured will say when he hears of it. I wish he'd had the light cut off, same as he did the telephone, when he went away. I could have got along well enough with a pound or two of candles."

"I shouldn't let that worry you, Mrs. Waller," replied Dr. Priestley soothingly. "Some defect has developed in the meter, no doubt. All measuring instruments are liable to go out of order for no apparent reason. But I am afraid that between us we have wasted your time. It must be unusual for you to have two visitors in the same afternoon."

"Yes, sir, 'tis a bit lonely sometimes," Mrs. Waller replied. "'Tisn't often that a soul comes near the place all the time I'm here, and that's from round about ten in the morning till maybe four in the afternoon, six days a week. I'll be glad when the family comes back. There's plenty of life about the house then, what with they and the servants."

"Do you work here when the family is at home, Mrs. Waller?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. There's a cook and two girls in the house, but I come along and help with the rough work, and Waller, he gives a hand in the garden in the summer. There's plenty of work to be done when they are all at home, sir."

Dr. Priestley, after pressing a small gratuity into Mrs. Waller's hand, walked back to Weyford, and caught a train to London. That evening, alone in his study, he allowed his thoughts to wander in the direction of Charles Alcott, deceased.

So there was a mystery, after all! A mystery which Faversham, accepting the obvious explanation, had not perceived. And the mystery lay in the two pieces of paper found in the dead man's pocket.

The ordinary person would see no particular significance in them. But Dr. Priestley was by no means an ordinary person, and to him these pieces of paper suggested a whole series of puzzling questions. He had only to shut his eyes to recall them vividly to his memory.

The curious shape of the scrap bearing Faversham's name and address, for instance. Torn into the form of a rough circle, about three inches in diameter. And torn into this shape after the address had been written, too. It had not escaped Dr. Priestley's keen eyes that the *s* of the "Hants" had been torn off. Who, having written a name and address on a piece of paper, would go to the trouble of tearing that paper into circular shape?

And then, the quality of the paper, the fact that it was soiled on the written side only, the apparent age of the writing. The quality, taken by itself, was of no particular significance. But the comparative cleanliness of the paper was suggestive. It could not have been carried about for long in Alcott's pocket. Not for nearly

so long a period as had elapsed since the words were written upon it.

What was the origin of this piece of paper? There was only one answer to this question that would satisfy all the conditions. It formed part of an envelope which had been through the post. The centre, bearing the name and address, had been torn out of the front of this envelope. This would account for the quality of the paper, and the fact that it was soiled on the written side only. The inside of an envelope would normally remain clean.

This conclusion, trifling though it was, seemed to Dr. Priestley to introduce an element of doubt. Faversham, and apparently everybody else concerned, accepted the theory that Alcott, being in the neighbourhood of Weyford and hearing that his one-time employer had a house in the district, had asked some unknown person for his address, and that person had written it down on a scrap of paper.

Dr. Priestley felt convinced that this theory was incorrect. It would have been a very remarkable thing if the unknown person applied to by Alcott had possessed an envelope, addressed to Faversham some weeks before. Even if this could have been considered likely, why had not the envelope been handed over intact?

Alternatively, what could have been the source of the envelope? If it had been through the post, as its appearance suggested, it must have been received by Faversham at Markheys. And after that? It would probably have been thrown into the waste-paper basket. The eventual destination of the contents of Markheys' waste-paper baskets was probably the bonfire in the garden. But anybody who had access to the place could have abstracted this particular envelope without difficulty. But why? And how had the address, without

the stamp and postmark, found its way into Alcott's pocket?

Before attempting to answer that question, Dr. Priestley focused his mind upon the letter signed "Hy. Alcott." Without being an expert, Dr. Priestley had some considerable experience of forged documents. His examination of this letter had convinced him of several things. First, that some bleaching agent containing chlorine had been applied to the paper. His keen sense of smell had detected a faint odour of chlorine still persisting, and this had been the cause of his inquiry about disinfection.

Again, the excessive fading of the ink, particularly in the heading and signature, was unnatural. No modern ink, however cheap, faded to that extent in any reasonable time.

Lastly, Dr. Priestley had come to the conclusion that the body of the letter had been written at a different time, and in all probability by a different hand, from the rest of the letter.

What did these observations suggest? To Dr. Priestley they suggested this. A letter had been written from 10 Silver Lane, Barnsley, and signed "Hy. Alcott." The paper upon which this letter was written had been subjected to a bleaching process, with the object of removing the original wording. The heading and address had been protected, but in spite of that, they had to some extent been attacked by the bleaching agent. The present form of wording had then been substituted for the original. The amount of bleaching agent remaining in the paper had caused this new wording to fade, until it approximated to the colour of the heading and signature.

Why should Alcott have been carrying in his pocket two documents possessing such curious characteristics? This seemed to Dr. Priestley to be the essence of the

problem. But supposing that he had not been carrying them? According to Sergeant Blewitt, Alcott might have been lying by the roadside for nearly four hours before the snow began to fall. Ample time for anybody to have tampered with his pockets. To abstract anything they might have contained, and to insert the two documents subsequently found by Blewitt.

What could have been the object of putting these particular documents in his pocket? To this question there was only one possible answer. In order that Alcott's identity should be established beyond all possibility of doubt. The letter pointed immediately to his father. If the old man had not died a year previously, he would have been summoned to identify his son. Next to his father, Faversham could give the most conclusive evidence. He was a well-known man, and one who would not express an opinion unless he were certain. He would carry conviction, therefore. And at one time, not so very long ago, after all, Alcott had been in almost daily contact with him. He could hardly fail to identify him.

But why should anyone have been so anxious that Alcott's identity should be correctly established? Was it possible that Alcott, in spite of his poverty-stricken appearance, possessed something that some other person was anxious to inherit?

5

Once Dr. Priestley was convinced that there was a mystery surrounding Alcott's death, his insatiable curiosity gave him no rest. Since the disappearance of Ernest Venner, no human problem had come his way. Even Superintendent Hanslet had failed him. The cases upon which he had been engaged recently were all of the simplest type offering no problem that he was not fully competent to solve.

The Venner affair had been disappointing. There had been none of the developments which Dr. Priestley had so confidently anticipated. He had reluctantly come to the conclusion that Faversham was right. Venner had quietly and successfully effaced himself, to begin life elsewhere in different surroundings and under a different name.

This new distraction was therefore welcome. Here the mystery lay not in Alcott's death, but in what had happened immediately preceding it. Where had Alcott been during the seven years since he had left Faversham's service? Faversham had a vague recollection that he had gone back to the Barnsley district. This, then, must be the starting point of any inquiries.

So Dr. Priestley, without revealing his intentions to anybody, even his secretary, took train to Barnsley. He inquired his way to the alms-houses, and asked to see the matron, to whom he introduced himself. "I am hoping that you will be able to tell me something about Henry Alcott," he said. "I understand that he was in your charge before he died?"

"Henry Alcott!" she replied with a smile. "Did you know him, Dr. Priestley?"

"I did not know him. But at one time I was

slightly acquainted with his son Charles, who died recently."

"Oh, yes, I heard about that. The police came here making inquiries, not very long ago. It's very odd that old Henry's son should have turned up again, after all these years. He always believed that he had been drowned long ago."

"Indeed!" said Dr. Priestley politely. "Can you tell me whether Henry Alcott had any other children?"

She shook her head. "I'm pretty sure he hadn't. He was a queer old man, who never talked much about his own affairs, but I managed to get on the right side of him, and he told me quite a lot about himself. He often told me that he had had only one child, a boy, and that his mother had died when he was born. The boy, whose name was Charles, ran away to sea when he was fifteen. Old Henry never saw him again, but he had a letter to say that his ship had been torpedoed during the war, and sunk with all hands."

"There must have been some mistake," Dr. Priestley replied thoughtfully. "I knew Charles Alcott seven years ago, when he was employed as a laboratory assistant by Sir Alured Faversham. And a letter from his father was found in his pocket after his death. Was Henry Alcott a man who could be trusted to tell the truth?"

"Well, not always. He would tell the most extraordinary stories sometimes if he thought he could get anything by it. He used to write all sorts of letters to people before he came here, but we soon put a stop to that. Begging letters and that sort of thing, you know. But I think he believed what he told me about that son of his. I know for a fact that he never heard from him all the time he was here."

Dr. Priestley frowned. The expression "I know for a fact," always irritated him. However, he let it pass.

" Henry Alcott was with you for about a year, was he not?"

" Rather longer than that," she replied. " Let me see, now. He has been dead just about a year, and he came here when the cottages in Silver Lane were pulled down. He must have been with us about fifteen months. We found him rather difficult at first, always complaining about something or other. But he got a lot more tractable before he died."

" I have no doubt that it was owing to your soothing influence," said Dr. Priestley. " What did he die of?"

The matron smiled at the compliment. " I tried to do my best for him, like I do with all our old men. Poor old Henry died very suddenly. He collapsed in his chair one afternoon and never recovered consciousness. The doctor couldn't decide what was the matter, and there was a port-mortem. They found some very rare disease of the heart, and were quite excited about it. One of the doctors told me afterwards that he had written to one of the medical papers about it."

" He possessed nothing of value at the time of his death, I suppose?" Dr. Priestley asked.

" Nothing at all, so far as I know. But Mr. Robbins could tell you more about that than I can. He always took an interest in him."

Mr. Robbins, it appeared, was a solicitor in the town. Dr. Priestley secured his address from the matron, and went to see him. He was a jovial elderly man, who looked as if he was in the habit of doing himself well. And when he learnt that Dr. Priestley was interested in Henry Alcott, he proved quite ready to talk.

" Henry Alcott?" he exclaimed. " Yes, of course. I remember him well. Queer old boy he was, a regular character. Regular old scamp in his way, too. You know about that son of his turning up the other day?

A case of the sea giving up its dead with a vengeance! I couldn't believe it when the police told me about it. Not that old Henry wasn't as cunning as a basket of monkeys. But what exactly do you want to know about him?"

"All you can tell me, Mr. Robbins," Dr. Priestley replied.

"All I can tell you! Well, that won't fill a volume. Henry Alcott was born here, and lived here all his life. At one time or another, when he was younger, he worked at one of the collieries. Some years ago he managed to get injured—there were some queer yarns about that. Anyhow, he wangled a pension, a few shillings a week.

"He lived in one of a row of cottages called Silver Lane. The place was a slum, there's no denying that. But it was just one of those cases where nothing could be done. Silver Lane belonged to an estate, of which I am the solicitor. The estate couldn't sell, and there wasn't enough money to pull down the existing houses and build new ones. Old Henry was the curse of my life in those days. He was for ever writing letters, saying this or that wanted repairing. He made the estate spend a lot more on his confounded hovel than they ever got from him in rent. But as he was always careful to pay his rent, we couldn't turn him out, owing to the provision of the Act."

"He was sufficiently well educated to write letters?" Dr. Priestley remarked.

"Oh, yes. Letters of a sort, that is. Not exactly the kind of thing you would expect to get from a Professor of English literature, you understand. But letter-writing was old Henry's hobby. He had nothing, or he gave everybody to understand that he had nothing, but that pension I spoke of just now. That didn't seem enough for Henry. So he used to amuse himself by

writing letters to all sorts of people, telling them that he was badly injured, and couldn't work, and that his only son, Charlie, who would have been a support to his aged father, had been killed in the war.

"You'd hardly believe it, but now and then it came off, and Henry would get back a note or a postal order. He seemed to have a gift for writing to the right sort of people. And his methods were original, I will say that. He used to get hold of a Sunday paper, and read all the sensational news. Then he'd pick out the name and addresses he fancied—I suppose his idea was that John Brown, acquitted on a charge of murder, or Mrs. Flighty, having secured a divorce, wouldn't mind parting with a shilling or two as a thank-offering."

"I suppose there is no doubt that he had a son Charles, who died in the war?"

"Apparently none. The police had a complaint about these begging letters, and they made inquiries. They found the birth certificates of Charles Alcott, born in this parish thirty-five years ago, the son of Henry and Mary Alcott.

"They found a record of Charles having attended school here. and several people remembered him. That seemed to prove Charles' existence. Henry told them that Charles had run away to sea early in 1914. And he produced a letter from the White Cross Shipping Company, written some time in 1916, telling him that their vessel, the *Patagonian,* had been torpedoed off the Scillies, and that all the crew, among whom was his son, Charles Alcott, were presumed to have been lost with her."

"Presumed," said Dr. Priestley thoughtfully. "That seems to leave a loophole, does it not?"

"It does. Of course, Charles may not have been really lost. He may have been picked up by the submarine, and taken to Germany as a prisoner. One never

knows. And something like that must have happened to him, for the police tell me that he was found dead somewhere in Hampshire only the other day."

"You think it by no means impossible that Charles Alcott may have been alive all those years?"

"Impossible? No. Surprising, if you like. For one thing, if the boy had run away from home once, he might have decided to keep away for good. And for another, even if his father knew that his son was alive, he wouldn't let on. He'd want to make all the capital he could out of the tragic story of the only son killed in the war. It wouldn't astonish me to learn that Charles had been sending money to the old ruffian from time to time. That is, if he was in a position to do so. Is it known what he had been doing all this time?"

Dr. Priestley produced the account of the case which he had cut from the *Weyford Standard*. "That will give you a better idea of the circumstances than any words of mine," he said.

Mr. Robbins read the cutting with evident interest. "Well, that's conclusive," he said, as he handed it back. "He had a letter from his father in his pocket, and Sir Alured Faversham identified him. I wonder when the letter was written? I see no date is mentioned. Damn that old rascal Henry! The letter shows that he knew his son was alive, all along! I wish I'd known that a couple of years ago, when I took all that trouble to get him into the alms-houses!"

But his annoyance gave way to amusement. "I wonder how much Henry got from him?" he continued. "He managed to keep it quiet enough. Swore to me that he had nothing but that wretched pension. It was like this. The estate got a very favourable offer from the Corporation for Silver Lane. There was a town-planning scheme on, and Silver Lane happened to come in the middle of it. Alternative accommodation was

found for everybody who lived there except old Henry. And he swore he couldn't afford to pay more than the three and six we had been charging him for his cottage.

"It was devilish awkward, for he couldn't be evicted. And then I thought of the alms-houses, where he wouldn't have to pay any rent at all. I happen to be one of the Governors of the charity, and a vacancy occurred just at the right time. Old Henry took a lot of persuasion, but we got him shifted at last. And as it happened, he died a year or so later."

"Leaving, I suppose, no property?"

"Not a bean, so far as anybody knows. Or a will either, for that matter. I fancy he spent whatever shillings he may have made by his begging letters, or received from his son, as fast as he got them. You'd usually find him in the public bar of the Catharine Wheel, scrounging drinks mostly, I expect, but paying for his own when he couldn't get anybody else to."

"So far as you know, he had no relatives except this one son?"

"None whatever. Inquiries were made before his admission to the alms-houses. Nobody could be found in any way related to him."

"Perhaps you will allow me one more question, Mr. Robbins. You said that you had received certain letters from Henry Alcott. Might I see one of these, if any are still in existence? I have seen the letter found in Charles Alcott's pocket, and I should very much appreciate the opportunity of comparing the two in my mind."

"By all means, if we've still got them," Mr. Robbins replied. "I'll find out."

He spoke to a clerk, who after some search produced a letter file, which he handed to the solicitor. "Here you are," said the latter, handing Dr. Priestley a sheet of paper. "That's a typical one. It'll show

you the sort of trouble we were always having with Henry."

Dr. Priestley examined the letter with interest. The paper was exactly the same as he had seen at Weyford, as was the handwriting. But the ink used, though obviously of a poor quality, had scarcely faded at all. The heading and signature were similar, even to certain peculiarities which Dr. Priestley remembered well. The contents of the letter were as follows.

"Dere Sir,

"This is to say the chimny pot as blew down as i always said and the kitchin smoke something fierce and make me corf terrible bad dere Sir a pore man like i can't afford reppairs to others property and this isnt write and please see to it at once yors truly Hy. Alcott."

Dr. Priestley handed the letter back. "In every respect it is remarkably like the document found in Charles Alcott's pocket," he said. "By the way, there is one thing not mentioned in that cutting I showed you just now. Faversham, whom I know personally, believed that when Charles Alcott left him seven years ago he had secured employment in this district."

"That strikes me as quite possible. But if he did, he didn't take up his quarters with his father in Silver Lane. Whether they met or not, I can't say. If they did, old Henry kept it devilishly quiet. And I don't suppose that Charles, if he was getting on in the world, would be desperately anxious to claim an old reprobate as his father. But the contents of Henry's letter, which are given in the cutting you showed me, seem to suggest that Charles wasn't in the neighbourhood when it was written. That reference to his job being so far away, I mean. Knowing Henry as I did, I should suspect that

he wrote in the affectionate father style, in the hope of extracting something substantial.''

After some further conversation, Dr. Priestley thanked Mr. Robbins for his information, and left the office. He stayed that night in Barnsley, and returned to London by an early train. But during the journey, he was bound to confess that the inquiries which he had made had not been of much help in solving the problem. They had certainly thrown no light upon the activities of Charles Alcott during the period immediately preceding his death.

Dr. Priestley was frankly puzzled. There seemed to be no earthly reason why anybody should have taken pains to secure the correct identification of Charles Alcott. He began to think that his appetite for human problems had overreached itself. Would anybody but himself have seen anything out of the ordinary in this man's death? He felt that, for his own satisfaction, he must talk the matter over with one of his friends.

It was no use saying anything to Faversham. Faversham, eminently practical, would only laugh at him, tell him that his imagination had run away with him, that he had found a mare's nest. Faversham had no love of a problem, just because it was a problem. Unless it directly concerned him in some way, he would push a problem aside impatiently, as a waste of valuable time.

Nor was it of any use to approach Superintendent Hanslet. Hanslet was a policeman, and necessarily viewed things from a policeman's standpoint. Dr. Priestley knew if he were to mention this case of Alcott to him, he would immediately ask whether there was any suggestion that a crime had been committed. Since at present there was none, Hanslet's interest would rapidly fade to vanishing point.

If anybody could be trusted to listen patiently, that man was Oldland. Oldland, in the right mood—and

Dr. Priestley fancied that he knew how that mood could be induced—could take an intelligent interest in a purely abstract problem. Yes, Oldland was the man. And the first thing Dr. Priestley did when he reached home was to send him a pressing invitation to dinner that night.

Dr. Priestley took particular pains over the ordering of the meal. He knew Oldland's tastes fairly accurately. And the whisky decanter was ready at his elbow when they adjourned to the study after dinner. There Dr. Priestley handed his guest the cutting from the *Weyford Standard,* and then he recounted the conversations he had had at Weyford and Barnsley.

Oldland listened in silence, glass in hand. "Well, honestly, Priestley," he said, his host having come to the end of his recital. "I don't see anything to get vastly excited about. These two documents you speak of stick in your gizzard, I can see that. You think there's something fishy about them. Well, perhaps there is. You've seen them, and I haven't. But what then?"

"The police found nothing whatever in Alcott's possession but a few coins and these two documents," Dr. Priestley replied. "Does it not strike you as curious that the only papers found should be open to suspicion?"

"Well, yes, perhaps it does. I'm wondering if Alcott faked that letter from his father, what use he could have made of it. Do you think he meant to show it to Faversham for any reason?"

Dr. Priestley shook his head. "I hardly think so. Nor do I find it easy to explain how Alcott obtained possession of an envelope sent through the post to Faversham. I think it is quite possible that both envelope and letter were deliberately placed in Alcott's pocket, unknown to him."

"But, man alive, what on earth for?" Oldland exclaimed. "You mean, I suppose, that they were put

in his pocket after he fell asleep by the roadside. But that, if you will forgive my saying so, it going beyond the bounds of possibility. It means that somebody happened to come along with those two pieces of paper, and found Alcott already unconscious. And then, instead of doing anything to help him, that somebody just uses him as a waste-paper basket, and goes on his way like the Levite. No, sorry, Priestley, but that's incredible."

"Not so incredible if that person had been deliberately following Alcott," said Dr. Priestley mildly. "However, we need not consider that for the moment. The documents were found in Alcott's pocket. What was the result?"

"Why, the local police tried to get in touch with Alcott's father, but he was dead. Failing him, they rang up Faversham. Oh, I see what you mean. The documents led to Alcott's immediate identification. If it hadn't been for them, the police wouldn't have known who the dead man was. Is that the right answer?"

"It appears to me to be perfectly correct. But what motive could any person have for desiring that the identification should be immediate?"

"There you've got me, Priestley," replied Oldland, helping himself to another whisky. "The only possible reason that I can think of for shoving documents in a dead man's pocket would be to secure a false identification. To try to prove that the body was Alcott's when it wasn't. But in this case, that won't wash. The police sent for Faversham, who, as he told us the other night, recognised the man at once."

"I can imagine another case where positive identification would be desirable," said Dr. Priestley. "An heir cannot inherit until the death of the testator is established."

"But that won't wash, either," Oldland replied

quickly. "Your investigations seems to have established pretty conclusively that Alcott had nothing to leave. And in any case, he had no relations to leave anything to."

"No. But he may have left a will, which has not yet been produced. And he may have possessed something of value, which is now in the custody of some other person. I do not mean anything of intrinsic value, necessarily. But some document which had a value to some particular person or persons. I am purposely indefinite."

Oldland laughed. "You've got a theory of some kind in your head, Priestley," he said. "Come on, out with it."

"I have amused myself by a certain amount of conjecture," Dr. Priestley replied. "An exercise which I sometimes permit myself to indulge in, though I deprecate it on the part of others. We all have our failings. I have thought it possible that Alcott was deliberately lured to the vicinity of Markheys, for some purpose at present unknown. An empty house, visited only during the day, has formed a basis for criminal operations before now."

"Yes, I'll admit that. But in this case criminal operations cannot have included murder. That's ruled out, absolutely. Look at the medical evidence, which we can assume to have been correctly reported in the cutting you showed me just now. No signs of violence, no injuries to the body, a perfectly healthy state of the organs. On the other hand, all the characteristic signs of exposure to cold. You can't expose a man on a frosty night against his will, unless you use force or drug him."

"I had not lost sight of that difficulty," Dr. Priestley replied. "But during my visit to Markheys, I overheard a conversation to which I did not pay any particular

attention at the time. An inspector came to read the electricity meter, and discovered that no less than seven hundred and thirty-six units had been used during the preceding three months. And Faversham and his family had left the house before that period began."

"Seven hundred and thirty-six units!" Oldland exclaimed. "It sounds a devil of a lot!"

"It is certainly excessive. Mrs. Waller, the caretaker, assured me that she was most careful with the light. I am not prepared to accept that statement unreservedly. But even suppose that she was reckless in her use of it. I have made a tentative calculation. During the three months in question, Mrs. Waller was at Markheys for six hours a day, six days a week for thirteen weeks, a total of four hundred and sixty-eight hours. We will suppose that during the whole time she was in the house, she switched on six lamps of sixty watts each, thus using 360 watts. If you multiply the hours by the watts and divide by one thousand, you will find that the result is no more than one hundred and sixty-eight and a half units."

"I'll take your word for it," Oldland replied. "I'm not an electrical engineer. You've certainly allowed Mrs. Waller a fine margin of wastage, and even then she wouldn't have used a quarter of what the meter showed. What's the snag?"

"This excessive expenditure of current, far beyond any credible wastage by Mrs. Waller, suggests to me that an unauthorised use has been made of electricity. The house stands in an isolated position upon an unfrequented road. It would not be difficult for an expert to make a key which would fit one of the doors, and so secure access to the house. The curtains being drawn, lights carefully placed would not be seen from the road at night."

"Somebody using the house for an unlawful purpose,

eh? Well, it's not impossible. Are you going to suggest this to Faversham?"

"I think not. It is hardly my business, and he might think me unduly inquisitive. He will get the electricity bill, with the number of units consumed. That should be sufficient for him to institute inquiries."

"But how does all this affect Alcott?" Oldland asked.

"That I hardly know. I have been unable to learn anything of Alcott during the past seven years. He may have obtained possession of something of value to other people. For example, as a laboratory attendant, he may have secured particulars of some chemical process. A secret formula for the preparation of some commercial article, if you like."

"By jove!" Oldland exclaimed. "I seem to remember Faversham telling me that he had a private laboratory of his own at Markheys. He described to me some experiments which he had been carrying out there, earlier in the year."

"Mrs. Waller informed me that there was a laboratory at Markheys," Dr. Priestley replied. It seemed that at last Oldland was beginning to realise the possibility which had already suggested itself to him.

"Well, then, suppose that somebody has been using this laboratory on the quiet for their own purposes? And suppose that this person knew that Alcott had this formula you speak of, and wanted to get hold of it? The envelope is explained. It may have been found kicking about the laboratory. The letter from Alcott's father I confess I don't understand. I think you must be wrong about it having been faked. The letter is probably genuine, and Alcott carried it about for sentimental reasons. The envelope was sent to him, of course, to bring him to Markheys."

Dr. Priestley smiled at Oldland's enthusiasm. "A very pretty web of conjecture," he said. "No, I do

not mean to imply any reproof. Something of the same sort had already occurred to me. But what happened between Alcott's arrival at Markheys some time after Mrs. Waller's departure on the Thursday evening, and the discovery of his body? That is the crucial period, it seems to me. And it is precisely during that period that conjecture is difficult."

Oldland shrugged his shoulders. "Guess work, call it," he replied. "Frankly, Priestley, my imagination is exhausted. I think Faversham is right, and that we shall never know the answer to either of these riddles."

IV

"THE YARD NEVER FORGETS"

I

DURING December and January, Superintendent Hanslet had had a very busy time. No case of the first magnitude had come his way, but he had been fully occupied with the ordinary routine of detection. But every now and then, the mystery surrounding Venner's disappearance recurred to his mind, and he determined, as soon as he found leisure, to give it his attention.

At last, the opportunity came. It happened to be the day of Dr. Priestley's return from his visit to Barnsley, but of that visit the Superintendent knew nothing. That morning, Hanslet found that he had nothing particular to do. He considered this unusual circumstance for a few minutes, then sent for one of his subordinates, Inspector Jarrold.

"Hallo, Jarrold!" he said, as the Inspector entered the room. "Have you got anything on this morning?"

"Nothing that can't wait, sir," Jarrold replied. "If you want me for anything——"

"I want to have a chat with you. Not here, in case we're interrupted. We'll go round to the Artillery Arms, and see if the beer's as good as ever."

The Artillery Arms was a public house, much frequented by officers of Scotland Yard. Hanslet and Jarrold ordered their tankards of beer, and made themselves comfortable in a corner of the smoking-room. The Superintendent took a long pull at his tankard, and then lighted his pipe. "Do you remember a chap called

Venner?" he asked abruptly, from behind a cloud of smoke.

"Venner?" Jarrold replied. "One moment. Ernest Venner. Yes, I remember. Lived in South Kensington, somewhere. Uncle died in suspicious circumstances. I can't recall his name at the moment. We began to make inquiries, but the coroner brought in a verdict of natural causes, and we left it at that. That's the man you mean, isn't it?"

"That's the man," said Hanslet. "His uncle's name was Hinchliffe. Remember what happened next?"

"Yes, I remember that part, because I was on the job. It was reported to us that Venner had disappeared. I interviewed his sister, Christine Venner, and two other people. The girl at his office, and an old solicitor chap, who gave me the impression of being a bit fond of lifting the elbow. We had a description circulated, I remember."

"Nothing's been heard of the chap since, has it?"

"Nothing whatever. Reports were to be sent in to me, but I've never had any. And it's getting on for three months now since he disappeared."

Hanslet took out a note-book. "I made a few notes of that case," he said. "I've always had an idea, somehow, that there was more in it than met the eye. Venner disappeared on November 15th. And since then I've heard a lot of chat about it, but nothing in the least bit helpful. I've been offered at least three long-winded explanations to acount for his disappearance. What's your idea?"

"Well, we know that Venner came into a lot of money a day or two before he vanished," Jarrold replied. "That's the clue, I've always thought. Since you ask me, I'm ready to bet that Venner just cleared out, money and all."

"H'm, that's Faversham's theory," Hanslet grunted

"And Faversham's a chap who knows what's what, or he wouldn't be where he is. But I know something that he doesn't, unless the Professor has told him, that is."

Hanslet buried his face in his tankard, and drank deeply. "Ha! that's better!" he exclaimed as he emerged. "Yes, thanks very much, Jarrold, I can do another. What would you say if I told you that that girl, Christine Venner, bought a whole lot of strychnine last May at the chemists round the corner?"

Jarrold whistled softly. "I shouldn't say much, but I should think a bit," he replied. "Why, dash it all, it was thought at one time that it was strychnine that killed her uncle."

"Yes, I know. But Faversham said it wasn't. I might still have had my doubts, but for the Professor. He swears that Faversham can't have made a mistake. And, for that matter, Doctor Oldland, the very man who wouldn't sign a certificate at first, is quite satisfied to take Faversham's word for it."

"How did the girl get hold of the strychnine?" Jarrold asked. "She must have had a prescription or something?"

"Not she. Just walked into the shop, said she wanted to kill mice, signed the poison book, and walked out with a couple of tins of Iver's Vermin Killer. More than enough strychnine in a tin to kill a man, the Professor says."

"But you've just assured me that you're pretty sure it didn't kill the uncle chap?" Jarrold suggested.

"No, it didn't kill Hinchliffe, apparently," Hanslet replied slowly. "But it might have killed somebody else."

"Somebody else," and Jarrold's voice was puzzled. Then, suddenly, "The devil! You don't mean Venner, do you?"

"That's just who I do mean. Look here, what are the facts? Let's put them as simply as we can. On May 1st, Christine Venner sports a shilling on Iver's Vermin Killer. I'm not suggesting that she had anything in her mind then. She may have wanted to kill mice, I don't know.

"Four days later, Hinchliffe, who had made a will in her favour, suddenly changes his mind. Ernest Venner goes sneaking to him about his sister's goings on, and Hinchliffe leaves his money to him instead of to her. Pretty dirty trick on Ernest's part, and not calculated to increase Christine's sisterly love.

"On September 3rd, Hinchliffe dies. On November 13th, or thereabouts, Ernest comes into possession of his inheritance. On the 15th Ernest disappears, and the last person who saw him alive was Christine. Now, what have you got to say?"

Jarrold quenched his thirst before he replied. "What did she do with the body?" he asked pertinently.

"Ah, now you're asking," Hanslet exclaimed. "But we've got a long way to go before we can answer that question. In the first place, what really happened to Venner that evening? His sister says that he walked out of the flat about six o'clock, wearing a blue suit and a bowler hat and all the rest of it. And because she came to us and reported his disappearance, we took her word for it. But did he? That's what I'd like to know."

"She couldn't very well have poisoned him in the flat," Jarrold replied. "I don't see how the dickens anyone is going to hide a body in the heart of South Kensington."

"Well, perhaps they left the flat together, and she poisoned him somewhere else. I don't know—yet."

"It's three months ago, now," said Jarrold. "Are you going to do anything about it?"

"I'm going to have a word with the Chief. If he

agrees, I'll get him to use a little persuasion with that bank manager you saw. The one who refused you information about Venner's account."

"The manager of the Farringdon Street branch of the London and Kensington? He's a bit of a tough nut to crack."

"Never mind. He'll have to cough up a few particulars about his client. You see what I'm after, don't you? Venner's been missing now for three months, as you say. If he's still alive, what has he been doing for money all this time? Has he been drawing on his account? If so, Faversham is right. He's merely lying low for reasons of his own, and it's none of our business. But if he hasn't, if the bank has heard nothing of him since November, things begin to look a bit queer, don't they?"

Hanslet and Jarrold spent some little time longer, discussing plans of campaign. The pair returned to Scotland Yard, where Hanslet interviewed the Assistant Commissioner, to whom he imparted his suspicions.

The Assistant Commissioner was sceptical. "It's an ingenious theory, Hanslet," he said. "Smart of you to think of looking at that poison book, very. And there are certainly coincidences in dates. But that girl is deucedly clever if she contrived to poison her brother and dispose of his body, single-handed."

"We might find the body, sir, if we had a hint where to look for it," Hanslet replied darkly.

"H'm, yes, if there is a body. But your scheme for tackling the bank isn't a bad one. As you say, it'll give us an idea of what's happened to this chap Venner. And now we can put up some sort of case. I tell you what I'll do, I'll get in touch with the head office of the bank. I'll tell them, as vaguely as I can, that we have reason to suspect that Venner's disappearance was due to foul play. Under the circumstances, we should be very

grateful if they would authorise their manager at Farringdon Street to give you, in confidence, certain particulars regarding Venner's account. How will that do?"

Hanslet agreed that this would do excellently. And, as a result, two days later he presented himself at the bank, produced his card, and asked for the favour of an interview with Mr. Yeoward, the manager.

"You will understand, Superintendent, that this is a very delicate matter," said Mr. Yeoward. "Bankers, like doctors, are bound to observe the strictest professional secrecy. On a previous occasion an inspector of your department called upon me to make inquiries concerning Mr. Venner's account. At that time I did not feel justified in giving him any information."

"I quite understand, Mr. Yeoward," replied Hanslet politely. "But now, in the rather peculiar circumstances?"

"In the circumstances, my head office has authorised me to answer any questions you may care to ask, Superintendent."

"Thank you, Mr. Yeoward," said Hanslet. "May I ask, to begin with, if Mr. Venner has drawn upon his account since November 15th last, the date upon which he is reported to have disappeared?"

"He has not," replied Mr. Yeoward shortly.

Hanslet paused before he spoke again. He was anxious to gain the bank manager's sympathy, and it seemed to him that the easiest way to do so would be to take him to some extent into his confidence. "That fact seems to confirm our suspicion, Mr. Yeoward," he said quietly. "Do you know whether Mr. Venner has another account at any other bank?"

"I am pretty certain that he has not," Mr. Yeoward replied. "I should explain, however, that he has two accounts with us, a private and a business account. Mr.

Venner's late secretary, Miss Loveday, was authorised to sign cheques upon the latter for sums not exceeding ten pounds. This privilege she continued to exercise until the end of last year, when we were informed that she was no longer employed by Mr. Venner. Upon our communicating with Miss Loveday, she confirmed this."

"I see. But my point is this, Mr. Yeoward. Mr. Venner's whereabouts, since November 15th last, are unknown. If he has not drawn upon his account since then, it is difficult to see how he has obtained money with which to carry on."

"I appreciate the point, Superintendent. But the difficulty is not so great as it appears to you. On November 15th Mr. Venner called here, and drew from his private account no less a sum than thirty thousand pounds."

Hanslet gasped. Thirty thousand pounds! It seemed incredible that anybody should be rich enough to draw so much money. For a second or two he sat staring at the banker stupidly. "It seems a lot of money," he said at last.

Mr. Yeoward made a gesture which seemed to suggest that thirty thousand pounds was a mere trifle. "Mr. Venner instructed us to sell securities to that amount," he continued. "I should explain that on Monday, November 12th, he brought here securities to the approximate value of a hundred thousand pounds, which represented, as he explained, the estate of his uncle, the late Mr. Hinchliffe.

"Mr. Venner then proceeded to give me certain instructions. There were, briefly, as follows. I was to sell sufficient of these securities to realise a sum of thirty-five thousand pounds. He wished to secure thirty thousand pounds of this sum immediately, and I arranged an overdraft to this extent for him, pending the sale of the securities. This overdraft was to be upon

his private, not his business account. The remaining five thousand accruing from the sale was to be paid into his business account, to meet a bill which matured at the end of November. Do I make myself clear, Superintendent?"

"Perfectly clear, Mr. Yeoward," Hanslet replied. "But this thirty thousand pounds. Do you mean that he actually took it away with him?"

"Not on the 13th. On that day Mr. Venner instructed me as to the form in which he wished to receive the sum. Five thousand pounds in Bank of England notes, and the rest in American dollar bills. The Bank of England notes were to be of small denominations, not larger than ten pounds. I carried out these instructions, and the notes and bills were ready for him by Wednesday, the 15th. That afternoon he called, shortly before half-past three, when the bank closes, and the money was handed over to him."

Mr. Yeoward spoke as though the handing over of such a sum was merely an incident in the day's work. But to Hanslet it seemed a staggering transaction. And the possibilities which it implied seemed no less staggering. "Did you see Mr. Venner when he came to draw the money?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw him, and had a conversation with him. In fact, it was in my office that the money was handed over."

"He did not say why he wanted all that money in cash?"

"He did not, nor did I ask him. He seemed anxious that his affairs should be in order in every way. He asked for details of both his accounts, and was supplied with them. He gave me the impression that he contemplated going away. But when I suggested this to him, he shook his head. 'Not going away, exactly,'

he said. 'But I may not have another opportunity for putting things straight!'"

"What could he have meant by that," Hanslet exclaimed.

"Really, Superintendent, I cannot say. I took Mr. Venner to mean that, for some reason, he would not be able to attend to business for an indefinite period. He seemed to me very much calmer than he had been before. It was no secret to me, of course, that he had had certain anxieties in connection with his business. No doubt, having inherited his uncle's money, his mind was thereby set at rest."

"It ought to have been, anyhow," replied Hanslet enviously. "I shouldn't worry much about anything if I came into a fortune like that. But what do you suppose made Mr. Venner disappear that very evening?"

Mr. Yeoward smiled. "Your department is presumably better qualified to answer that question than I am, Superintendent," he said.

"We'll do our best to answer it," Hanslet replied grimly. "Just one more question, Mr. Yeoward. Have you a record of the numbers of the notes handed over to Mr. Venner?"

"Of the Bank of England notes, yes. I can let you have a list of the numbers if you will be so good as to wait for a few minutes."

Hanslet left the bank with the list in his pocket. He went straight back to the Yard, and sent for Inspector Jarrold, to whom he gave the list with instructions to have it circulated. Then he gave him an account of his interview with Mr. Yeoward. "What about it now, eh?" he concluded triumphantly.

"Well, it looks very much as if Venner had thirty thousand pounds in cash when he disappeared," Jarrold replied.

"Of course he had, any fool could see that," said

Hanslet testily. "And that disposes of a difficulty I've always had in my mind. If his sister did him in, her motive was to get hold of the money. That's plain enough, isn't it? But, and this is the point, before she could touch the money, she would have to prove that Venner was dead. In the absence of his body to produce, she would have to wait seven years before she would be allowed to presume his death. That's always seemed to me a bit of a snag. But, if she got thirty thousand pounds for her trouble on the nail, so to speak, she could afford to wait seven years for the rest, couldn't she?"

"Yes," replied Jarrold, with a shade of doubt in his voice. "That sounds all right. But why did Venner draw the greater part of the money in American dollar bills? Doesn't that look a bit as though he meant to clear off to the States?"

"He may have meant to, but I fancy that his sister didn't give him the chance. She knows a lot more than she's let on, I'll be bound. She knew he'd drawn that money all right. Besides, if he meant to clear off to the States, why did he tell the bank manager that he wasn't going away?"

"He told his secretary that he was," remarked Jarrold. "So that seems to cancel out."

"He told her that he had to go out of London on business connected with his uncle's death, and might not see her again that week. Anyhow, that's what you reported at the time. And if you can fit in that statement with a projected visit to the States, it's more than I can."

"All the same, it might be worth while trying to find out if he did go to America," Jarrold persisted.

"All right. Go off on that track if you like. I won't

stop you. I'm hoping we may manage to pick up one of those notes I've just given you the numbers of."

Hanslet's hopes were realised much earlier than he had any right to expect. The tracing of notes is usually a very lengthy business. But, as it happened, a ten-pound note, identifiable by its number as one of those issued to Venner, had been returned to the Bank of England in a damaged condition. The Bank, upon receiving the list of numbers from the police, informed Scotland Yard of this, and the note was handed over to Hanslet, with such particulars as were available. Hanslet spent a day in making investigations, and that evening, having made an appointment for the purpose, he called upon Dr. Priestley.

As he made his way to Westbourne Terrace, the Superintendent sincerely hoped that he would find Dr. Priestley alone. Latterly, he had always seemed to have either Sir Alured Faversham or Doctor Oldland with him. The latter Hanslet did not so much mind. He certainly had a way of making irrelevant remarks, and he seemed quite unable to take anything seriously. But then, after all, very little attention need be paid to him.

But Faversham was a very different matter, and, secretly, Hanslet was a little bit afraid of him. A man of his position, on intimate terms with high officials in the Home Office, must be treated with all due deference. And Faversham, confound him, had a distinctly domineering way with him. He was rather too apt to smile at the opinions of a mere policeman, and to force his own down other people's throats. And that was distinctly irritating, especially to Hanslet, who could not venture to contradict.

It was therefore much to his relief that he found Dr. Priestley alone. " I suppose you've forgotten all about

that chap Venner by this time, haven't you, Professor?" he began.

"No, I have not forgotten him," Dr. Priestley replied quietly. "I should rather have expected that you would have done so, however. Has any fresh incident occurred to recall him to your mind?"

"The Yard never forgets," Hanslet replied sententiously. "That's where a lot of crooks get caught out. They think we've forgotten, but we haven't. And, as it happens, I've found out something fresh. I got the Chief to persuade Venner's bank manager to talk to me. And what he said will interest you, I think."

Dr. Priestley smiled. "That was an excellent move on your part, Superintendent," he said.

Much gratified by this praise, Hanslet repeated his conversation with Mr. Yeoward, and his success in tracing one of the notes. "That was a bit of luck, I confess. It just happened that this note got torn, and was sent back to the Bank of England to be destroyed. It was sent to them by the Oxford Street branch of the Southern Bank on January 12th. I went to see the manager there, and they traced it as having been handed in by the cashier of Milsom and Green, the big shop in Oxford Street, on January 8th.

"Then I went to Milsom and Green, and made inquiries there. It seems that they bank the cash they receive, every afternoon. The note, therefore, must have been taken on the previous day, the 7th. It's a great big place, with dozens of departments, and heaven knows how many cash-desks, each with a girl in charge. But they have an excellent rule, and that is this. If a customer whom they don't know hands in a Bank of England note, he or she is asked to write their name on the back."

"Not an uncommon custom," Dr. Priestley re-

marked. "And had the customer signed this particular note?"

"He had. I'll show you in a minute. But, naturally, the name was nothing. I wanted to find out who the man was, and, if possible, get into touch with him. So these wretched cash-girls were called up one by one to the manager's office, and I talked to them. I thought the procession of light and dark, plain and pretty, sulky and cheerful, intelligent and dense, would never come to an end. I showed each of them the note in turn, and they all swore that they had never taken it at their own particular desk. It wasn't until I was nearly at the end of them that I had any luck at all. And then it wasn't much.

"At last one of the girls said she remembered the note. She was quite bright and intelligent in her way. She remembered somebody handing in a ten-pound note, because it was the only one she had ever taken. She had asked the customer to sign his name, according to regulations, and he had done so. But that was all she could tell me. She hadn't the slightest recollection of what he looked like, or anything about him. You couldn't really expect her to, after so long. Nor could the management help me. The name wasn't among their list of regular customers. It's a confounded nuisance, because it brings us to a dead end, as far as that particular note is concerned. The only thing I can think of is to put a notice in the papers, asking the man to communicate with the Yard. Here's the note, in case you care to see it."

Dr. Priestley took the note which Hanslet handed him, and turned it over. On the back was a scribbled signature, "Chas. Alcott."

2

For a long time Dr. Priestley stared at the note without speaking. He appeared to be examining the signature but, as a matter of fact, he was doing nothing of the kind. He was marvelling at the amazing coincidence which had established a link between Ernest Venner and Charles Alcott.

When at last he looked up, Hanslet saw a queer smile at the corner of his mouth. "I do not think you need waste your time trying to get into touch with the man who signed this note, Superintendent," he said.

"How's that, Professor?" asked Hanslet. "He could tell us where he got it from, and so in time we might trace it back to Venner."

"He might, if he were alive," replied Dr. Priestley. "But I have every reason to believe that he died on January 18th."

"Why, you don't mean to say that you knew him, Professor?" exclaimed Hanslet, in a startled voice.

"I cannot say that I knew him. But I think that I can give you some information concerning him." Dr. Priestley opened a drawer of his desk, from which he produced the cutting from the *Weyford Standard* which Sergeant Blewitt had given him. "It may interest you to read that," he said, as he handed it to the Superintendent.

Hanslet read it through, looking more and more puzzled as he proceeded. "An old assistant of Sir Alured's!" he exclaimed at last. "And you think that this poor chap is the man who signed the note, Professor?"

"I think it probable," Dr. Priestley replied. "The name is the same, but that is not everything. You will observe that the word Charles on the note is abbreviated

to Chas. The shirt of the dead man was marked Chas. Alcott. His father also employed an abbreviation, and signed himself Hy. Alcott. It seems to have been a family characteristic. There may be nothing in this, but it is at least suggestive."

"It is, counfoundedly suggestive," said Hanslet thoughtfully. "But, hang it all, it can't be the same man. Look here, when this Weyford fellow died on January 18th, he was very shabbily dressed, and had only a few coppers in his pocket. Yet on the 7th, only the previous week, the man who signed the note walked into Milsom and Green's, which isn't the sort of shop where you meet shabby customers, and tenders a ten-pound note. If it's the same man, he must have gone downhill pretty fast in those eleven days."

"That is not the only peculiarity about the Weyford case," Dr. Priestley replied. "Certain aspects of it aroused my interest, and I made some investigations on my own account." And he proceeded to describe them briefly.

Hanslet seemed slightly disappointed. "I don't see much in that," he said. "Nothing suspicious, I mean. Whatever your Charles Alcott may have been up to before he died, there's no doubt about his identity. Sir Alured swears to that, and that's enough for me. But I've got an idea. Do you think he could identify the signature on this note as that of the man who was his assistant? That would settle the point whether there were two Charles Alcotts or only one."

"You can ask him, if you like," Dr. Priestley replied. "But I did not mean to question the identity of the man found dead near Weyford. I only wondered, as the note suggests, whether he could have had any connection with Ernest Venner since last November."

"You mean whether he got the note from him direct, and not through other hands? Well, that's possible, of

course. But that would mean that Venner is still skulking about somewhere. Unless——"

Hanslet paused, as though suddenly struck by a fresh idea. "I never thought of that possibility before!" he exclaimed.

Dr. Priestley said nothing, and after a pause the Superintendent continued. "Look here, Professor. Suppose that girl Christine Venner isn't in the picture at all? Suppose she told us the strict truth about her brother's disappearance? In that case, Venner walked out of the flat on the evening of November 15th, bound for some unknown destination, and carrying thirty thousand pounds in cash with him. He'd be a fine haul for any bandit he fell in with, wouldn't he? And suppose Charles Alcott was that bandit?"

"In order to solve the mystery of Venner's disappearance you will have to go further back than that," Dr. Priestley replied. "I will admit that he may have been murdered for the sake of the money he was carrying. But why was he carrying that money? Why, in the first place, did he draw so large a sum from the bank? If he had a payment of that amount to make, he could have done so much more conveniently by cheque. Why did he specify that the bulk of the sum should be in American dollars? I can only suggest one answer to those questions."

"And what's that, Professor?" asked Hanslet eagerly.

"That Venner's disappearance can be explained as Sir Alured Faversham originally suggested. That he had determined to leave the country, and start life afresh elsewhere. The dollars suggest that his destination was America."

"Ah, I thought you were going to say that, Professor!" Hanslet exclaimed, in a tone of intense satisfaction. "But it won't do. Jarrold, whom I think

you've heard me speak of before, has been working on that very line. Nobody can embark for America unless they have a passport, endorsed for the United States. A visa from the American Consulate is also necessary before they can disembark, at the passport office.

"Now, Jarrold's inquiries have established this. Ernest Venner, of 7 Clewer Street, South Kensington, was issued with a passport five years ago. It was endorsed for all European countries, but it has never been endorsed for America. Nor has anyone of that name applied for a visa at the American Consulate. And I think we can be quite sure that Venner didn't secure a passport under a false name. That's a very much more difficult thing than you might think. It requires the collusion of a responsible person, for one thing."

Dr. Priestley glanced at the clock. He was not anxious to discuss the matter further with Hanslet until he had had time to consider this new development. The Superintendent, who knew his ways, was quick to take the hint. "I only just dropped in to give you my news, Professor," he said. "I'll be getting along now."

"Do you contemplate any further steps?" Dr. Priestley asked, as Hanslet left the room.

"Not until I've something more to go on. Christine Venner is being watched, and if she tries to pass any of these notes on my list, or to change a dollar bill, why, then I've got her. Good-night, Professor."

Dr. Priestley smiled as the front door closed behind the Superintendent. Hanslet's methods were always direct and practical. But the smile rapidly changed into a frown. To Dr. Priestley it seemed that the Venner case was growing more incomprehensible than ever.

The most startling thing, though Hanslet, apparently, did not regard it as such, was that Charles Alcott's name should have cropped up. Dr. Priestley was prepared to allow a very wide margin for coincidence. But

it certainly was a most extraordinary thing that this connection, slight as it was, should have been established between Venner and Alcott. Venner who had mysteriously disappeared, and Alcott who had as mysteriously appeared, after a silence of seven years.

Dr. Priestley could make nothing of it, until a chance remark of Faversham's occurred to him. In describing his identification of Alcott's body, he had said that any description which he could have given from memory might have applied to a thousand people, Venner among them. There must, then, have been some fleeting resemblance between the two.

A very curious theory began to take shape in Dr. Priestley's brains. It was possible that Venner, some time before his disappearance, had become acquainted with Alcott, and had noticed the resemblance. Wishing to disappear, he had taken Alcott into his confidence. He had offered Alcott a sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, to be paid in dollars, with which Alcott was to go to America and stay there. In return, Venner was to assume Alcott's name and personality.

This scheme was put into operation as soon as Venner was in a position to draw the necessary sum from the bank. He then drew twenty-five thousand for Alcott, and five thousand for himself, upon which to live for the present. He would not wish to give any clue to his whereabouts by cashing cheques until he had made himself secure under his new identity. Taking the whole thirty thousand with him, he had, on the evening of November 15th, gone to some appointed rendezvous with Alcott, and handed over the dollars.

The theory was quite plausible so far. Venner, as Alcott, had changed one of his ten-pound notes at Milsom and Green's, and, when called upon to sign it, had done so in his new name. But how to account for

Alcott's body being found frozen to death on January 18th?

If Alcott had been murdered, many of the difficulties would have disappeared. It could have been supposed that Alcott had not kept his part of the bargain. He had either never gone to America, or he had returned from there. It might be supposed that he had been dissatisfied with his twenty-five thousand pounds, and had threatened to give information as to Venner's present identity and whereabouts, hoping to extort more. Murder, as a reply to blackmail, was by no means unknown.

But Dr. Priestley, reading again the account of the evidence at the inquest, could see no possibility of Alcott having been murdered. The cause of his death had been established beyond any possibility of doubt. And it was impossible to believe that he had been forcibly exposed to the frost until he died, without his body showing the slightest trace of violence.

His theory seemed so alluring to Dr. Priestley that he decided to shelve that point for the moment, and to continue on the assumption that Alcott's death had in some inexplicable way been contrived. In that case, it had been contrived by Venner, in order to secure himself. But Alcott dead, Venner found himself faced with a very peculiar difficulty, due to the resemblance which existed between them. He could not afford to leave the body to be found without any marks of identification upon it, lest it should be mistaken for his own.

Dr. Priestley smiled to himself as he considered how this problem must have presented itself to Venner. He would guess that his own description had been circulated soon after his disappearance. He would assume that if the police found the body of an unknown man, the first thing they would do would be to look through the descriptions in their possession of missing men. And if

this resulted in the body being identified as his own, his sister would automatically inherit his estate. The only way to prevent this would be for him to make himself known, when his carefully-staged disappearance would be at an end.

The only escape from the difficulty would be to assure that the body should immediately be identified as that of Alcott. So promptly that the question of it being that of anybody else would never be raised. But Alcott would have altered since he obtained the twenty-five thousand pounds. From poverty he had sprung to affluence. His face and hands would be clean and well-kept. He would possibly be smartly dressed. It would be necessary to restore his appearance, as far as possible, to that he presented when Venner first knew him.

Hence the shabby clothes, which Venner must have provided in readiness, the marking on the collar-band of the shirt, and the letter from his father. But there was a still more certain way of ensuring the desired recognition. Alcott had told Venner that he had once been employed by Sir Alured Faversham. Sir Alured Faversham could identify him, and his evidence would never be questioned. Had not Faversham's evidence already saved Venner himself from a charge of murder? Hence the insertion of the fragment of envelope bearing Faversham's address in Alcott's pocket.

The longer Dr. Priestley considered this theory, the more it appealed to him. He began to apply it to each of the circumstances in turn. The scene of the discovery of Alcott's body, for instance. How was it that this had happened so close to Markheys?

Dr. Priestley recalled his conversation with Oldland, not long before. He had been convinced then, from the reading of the meter, that Markheys had been surreptitiously occupied during Faversham's absence. He was

even more convinced of it now. And it seemed quite likely that Alcott had been that surreptitious tenant.

If so, Alcott's first visit to Markheys had not been paid on January 18th, but long before. Alcott, wishing to appeal to his former employer, had sought his address in some book of reference. Dr. Priestley took *Who's Who* from the shelf and turned up the entry relating to Faversham. Yes, his address was given as "Markheys, near Weyford, Hants." Alcott had undoubtedly seen that, perhaps in some public library.

Alcott had gone to Markheys, and found the house shut up. And then, perhaps, the idea that it would form a home of refuge had occurred to him. As a former laboratory assistant, he would be sure to be dexterous in the use of tools. It would not be difficult for him to make the necessary key. If he had obtained access to the laboratory wing, he would be safe there by day as well as by night, since Mrs. Waller had no key to that part of the house.

Perhaps Markheys had been the meeting-place of Venner and Alcott on the evening of November 15th! If so, what could be more natural than that it should be used for subsequent meetings? For those meetings at which Alcott threatened blackmail, and which culminated in his death. Where would Venner be likely to find an envelope addressed to Faversham but in Faversham's own house?

A plausible theory, certainly, which, if correct, would explain a good deal. But not by any means everything. Dr. Priestley, as he reviewed it, was uncomfortably aware that it was open to objection. It assumed that Alcott's death had not been due to misadventure. It was too much to believe that Venner had come upon his dead body at such a convenient moment for himself. Again, Alcott, if not really destitute, must certainly have had acquaintances, and it was strange that those

acquaintances had made no sign. Finally, what had become of Venner since January 18th? Was he still living under the assumed personality of Alcott? And, if so, where?

Once again Dr. Priestley realised that these questions could not be answered by a process of pure deduction. If Venner were to be found, he must be sought for with all the resources which the police had at their disposal. Hitherto, there had been no inducement for such a search. But now, perhaps, the necessary machinery would be put in motion. Hanslet, believing that Venner had been murdered, might be expected to institute an intensive search for his body. But Dr. Priestley, believing rather that he had contrived the death of Alcott, thought that if found at all, he would be found alive.

He decided to try the effect of his theory upon Oldland, who could be relied upon to criticise it in an intelligent spirit.

Two days later, therefore, Oldland arrived at Westbourne Terrace shortly before dinner, and was shown into the study. As usual, a tray was laid there, bearing a decanter of sherry and some glasses. But to-night there was an addition which made Oldland open his eyes in astonishment. A brand new cocktail shaker!

Dr. Priestley, seeing Oldland's amazement, smiled. "A concession to the modern fashion, Oldland," he said. "I have thought that it has been inhospitable of me to offer my guests nothing but sherry before dinner. That I perfer it myself is no reason why I should inflict my personal tastes upon others."

"I prefer sherry myself, though I must confess to indulgence in the cocktail habit now and then," Oldland replied. "I hope you haven't provided a cocktail solely on my account?"

"Oh, not at all. I think it quite possible that I may acquire the habit myself, with perseverance." Dr.

Priestley picked up the unaccustomed object, and shook it with a professional air that nearly took Oldland's breath away.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the doctor. "That I should live to see this! I tell you what it is, Priestley. I'll give you a bit of advice gratis. The cocktail habit is a most insidious one. Anyone will tell you that. Before you know where you are, you'll be giving cocktail parties to all the youth and beauty of your acquaintance."

"The success of such parties would depend upon my skill as a cocktail mixer," Dr. Priestley replied solemnly. "You shall give me your opinion upon that."

He opened the mixer, and poured the contents into two glasses, one of which he offered to his guest. Oldland picked it up and eyed it doubtfully. The colour of the mixture was not inviting, being of a muddy greenish brown. And, in addition, it smelt of peppermint.

It occurred to Oldland that Dr. Priestley, brilliant scientist though he might be, would never make his fortune behind a cocktail bar. But he raised the glass to his lips, took a cautious sip of the mixture, and swallowed. It cost him a tremendous effort to control his facial muscles. "Well, all I can say is, Priestley, that's a new one on me!" he gasped. "You won't mind my suggesting it, I know. Haven't you overdone the bitters a trifle?"

Dr. Priestley took a sip in his turn, and rolled it round his mouth. "It is a trifle bitter, perhaps," he replied, in the tone of an expert sampling a new and expensive drink. "I must confess that I vastly prefer sherry. And yet, from my own observation, I know that many people seem to derive great enjoyment from cocktails."

"It rather depends on their ingredients" said Oldland, eyeing his glass with great disfavour. "I shouldn't like to hazard a guess what you've made this of. It's most devilishly strong, and intensely bitter, and there's a flavour of peppermint about it."

"I will give you the recipe with pleasure," Dr. Priestley replied gently. "You take equal parts of creme-de-menthe and rum. To this you add a tablespoonful of ammoniated quinine, and a little ultramarine, to improve the colour."

"Oh, Lord!" Oldland groaned. "You won't be offended if I don't drink the rest, will you? I know where you got that recipe from now, barring the ultramarine. It's that ghastly concoction that old Hinchliffe took when he was suffering from influenza. I shouldn't be surprised, now that I've tasted it, if it hastened his death."

"Believe me, I did not inflict it upon you without a purpose," Dr. Priestley replied. "Put it away, and let me pour you out a glass of sherry."

After dinner, Dr. Priestley returned to the subject of his practical joke. "My so-called cocktail was in the nature of a demonstration," he said. "You will allow that I tasted it myself, at the same time that I inflicted it upon you. What was the first impression that it made upon your palate?"

Oldland shuddered. "I can recall it now, even after the excellent dinner which you've just given me. What struck me first about it? Why, the horrible bitter taste. You don't expect to find ammoniated quinine in a cocktail, you know."

"Yes, the bitterness of the quinine, and the aftertaste of peppermint. That was exactly my experience. Now, this is the point upon which I am anxious for your opinion. If a small quantity of yet another ingredient,

itself intensely bitter, were added, would this addition be noticeable?"

Oldland shook his head. "I'm quite sure it wouldn't," he replied. "You couldn't make the stuff any nastier, however hard you tried. And, if you're expecting me to taste the result, I sincerely hope you won't try."

"No, the tasting test is concluded," Dr. Priestley replied. "There remains the colour test. Will you excuse me for a moment?"

Dr. Priestley went out, to return with a couple of test-tubes, labelled A and B. These he held up to the light. "The tube marked A contains the mixture as sampled by us before dinner," he said. "B contains a similar mixture, but without the addition of the ultramarine. Can you perceive any difference in colour between them?"

Oldland took the test-tubes, and examined them by reflected and transmitted light in turn. "B is possibly a shade greener than A," he said. "But the difference is so slight that nobody would notice it unless it was pointed out to them. I certainly can't say that the ultramarine improves the colour much. Would it be indiscreet to ask what you are driving at, Priestley?"

"This is the point that I wish to establish," Dr. Priestley replied gravely. "Whether or not the addition of a certain quantity of Iver's Vermin Killer to a mixture of rum, creme-de-menthe and ammoniated quinine would make any perceptible difference to its taste or colour."

"Iver's Vermin Killer!" Oldland exclaimed. "Upon my word, Priestley, your taste in cocktails is getting more and more depraved. I never heard of the stuff. What's it made of?"

"It is a compound of flour, strychnine, and ultramarine," Dr. Priestley replied. "Seriously, Oldland,

I should be glad if you would consider the point I have just mentioned, and give me your opinion upon it."

Oldland shrugged his shoulders. The intricacies of his host's dispensing were beyond him. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't," he said after a few moments' thought. "The flour would produce a certain amount of turbidity, but that would be masked by the milkiness of the ammoniated quinine. The strychnine would dissolve in the alcohol, and, though strychnine is bitter, you couldn't make the stuff more bitter than it is already. The ultramarine would be tasteless, and, as you've demonstrated, would only make an imperceptible difference to the colour."

"Is it not a fact that the gastric juices would decolourise ultramarine, so that no traces of the pigment would be found in the intestines after death?"

"I believe it is," Oldland replied. "I seemed to remember reading that in a text-book somewhere. Look here, Priestley, can't you tell me straight out what you are driving at?"

"Miss Venner purchased a quantity of Iver's Vermin Killer some four months before her uncle died," said Dr. Priestley quietly.

Oldland nearly leapt from his chair. "The devil she did!" he exclaimed. "Now I see what you've been leading up to all this time. You think that she or her brother put some of the stuff into the uncle's medicine? By Jove, that's a bright thought!"

He frowned, and then burst out again impulsively. "It's no good, though. It simply won't do, and there's an end of it. I thought of the possibility of strychnine poisoning as soon as I saw Hinchliffe. That's why I wouldn't grant a certificate. But Faversham can't have been mistaken. It's a sheer downright impossibility. Listen to me once more, and I'll try to explain.

"Faversham was mistaken in the case of poor Claver-

ton, I know, but that was an entirely different pair of shoes. The Hinchliffe business was absolutely straightforward. He was definitely looking for evidence of strychnine. I had told him of my suspicions. An absolutely simple and reliable test for strychnine exists, which Faversham must have applied a thousand times. He applied this test in the case of Hinchliffe, and secured a negative result, in spite of repeated experiments. He told me so himself. Therefore I am completely satisfied that there were no traces of strychnine in Hinchliffe's body. Which proves conclusively that he did not die of strychnine poisoning. I'm sorry, Priestley, but your most ingenious idea falls to the ground, and you might have spared me the taste of that filthy concoction."

"Then I must apologise for any inconvenience which I may have caused you," Dr. Priestley replied. "Let us return to the subject of Venner's disappearance. I have acquired some further information on that point since we last discussed the matter."

Oldland listened with the greatest interest while his host repeated the conversation he had had with Superintendent Hanslet. Then, as Dr. Priestley concluded by describing the signature on the ten-pound note, he laughed mirthlessly. "It seems to me, Priestley, that the whole thing is a hopeless tangle," he remarked. "How can you account for Charles Alcott being mixed up in the affair? Coincidence, eh? Or have you evolved, as usual, some masterly theory which explains all the circumstances?"

"I have evolved a theory," Dr. Priestley replied slowly. "It is, however, open to at least one grave objection. But, nevertheless, I should be glad of your opinion upon it."

Again Oldland listened, but this time with an incredulous smile. "Most ingenious, Priestley," was his comment. "But it won't do, you know. It seems to me

utterly impossible that Alcott's death should have been contrived, as you put it. In fact, if you don't mind my saying so, this theory of yours is on a parallel with your demonstration of how old Hinchliffe might have been poisoned. With your brilliant powers of deduction, you have adequately accounted for two murders. The snag is, that in both cases we know that no murder was committed."

Dr. Priestley smiled. "A legitimate criticism, Oldland," he replied. "But destructive, rather than constructive. Can you suggest any alternative theory?"

Oldland threw up his hands in mock despair. "What have I done to be numbered among the wise men?" he exclaimed. "The whole thing is utterly beyond me. You all seem to be at sixes and sevens. Hanslet, apparently, has got hold of the idea that Venner has been murdered by the fair Christine, but can't produce the body. You have just tried to persuade me that Venner murdered first his uncle and then Alcott. You can produce the bodies but the facts prove that neither of them was murdered. Meanwhile, I might point out that Venner's whereabouts remain as much of a mystery as ever."

"Then what would you suggest?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"Suggest? Why, that you should drop the whole thing. You're trying to detect a crime of which there is no evidence that it was ever committed. You don't even know who's the criminal and who's the victim. That's how it seems to me. Drop it, Priestley, if only for the sake of your friends. I'm getting as sick of the name of Venner as Faversham was long ago."

He poured himself out a whisky and soda, and held it to his lips. "Let's drown Venner for good and all, shall we?"

3

Superintendent Hanslet, as Dr. Priestley had perceived, was not greatly impressed by what the latter had told him regarding Charles Alcott. His belief that Venner had been murdered for the sake of the money which he had been carrying remained unshaken.

He said as much to Jarrold, on the day following his visit to Westbourne Terrace. "The chap was done in, that's as clear as daylight. And that sister of his was at the back of it, ten to one. If not, if he was just knocked on the head by some stray crook, it's possible that this fellow Alcott was the man. I think I'd better run down to Weyford, and get that story at first hand."

Thus it came about that Hanslet interviewed Sergeant Blewitt. But the sergeant could tell him no more than he had already told Dr. Priestley. He described the finding of the body, and the inquest. But, beyond that, he had nothing fresh to report.

Hanslet listened to him with ill-concealed impatience. "Yes, yes!" he exclaimed. "That's all right enough. But what sort of a chap was this Charles Alcott? That's what I want to find out."

"He must have been quite respectable, sir," Blewitt replied. "As I've just told you, he had been an assistant to Sir Alured Faversham, who's got a house a couple of miles outside the town."

"Yes, I know. But that was seven years ago. A man might be butler to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and turn into a crook after he had left Lambeth Palace. Don't you know anything about Alcott except that?"

"Nothing at all, I'm afraid, sir," replied Blewitt. "He was a stranger to these parts. Nobody about here had ever seen him before."

"It's a pity steps were not taken at the time to find

out where he came from," Hanslet grumbled. "Still, that can't be helped now, I suppose. I'd like to see those bits of paper you found in his pocket."

Blewitt produced them. "You're not the first person who's seen them lately, sir," he remarked. "I had a funny old boy down here not long ago, who told me he was a friend of Sir Alured's and asked to see them. Dr. Priestley, he said his name was. Wore glasses, and looked as if he couldn't see very well."

Hanslet laughed shortly. "Couldn't see very well!" he exclaimed. "Don't you run away with that idea, Sergeant. I wish I could see half as far through a brick wall as the Professor can. What did he say about these papers?"

"He didn't say much, sir. He remarked that the ink of this letter from Alcott's father was badly faded. And then he took it up and smelt it, and asked if it had been disinfected."

"Smelt it, did he?" replied Hanslet. He held the paper to his nose and sniffed it himself. "It does smell a bit queer, certainly. Look here, do you mind if I borrow this letter for a day or two? I'll give you a receipt for it, of course."

Blewitt raised no objection, and the Superintendent brought the letter back with him to Scotland Yard, where he handed it over to a certain expert who specialised in forged documents. "There's something fishy about this letter," he said. "I don't exactly know what it is, but you'll find out, no doubt. You might have a look at it, and let me know."

Hanslet felt pretty certain, from the interest which Dr. Priestley had displayed in the letter, that it was not so straightforward as it seemed. And his suspicions were correct. A couple of days later the expert came to see him, bringing the letter, which he handled as though it were some object of value.

"Quite an interesting document, in its way," he said. "Somebody has monkeyed with it since it left the original writer's hands. The heading and the signature, 'Hy. Alcott,' are genuine enough. But that's all that's left of the original letter. The rest is a fake."

"What do you mean, a fake?" asked Hanslet.

"I'll try to explain. This letter isn't what was written by Hy. Alcott, whoever he may be. An uneducated man, certainly, who used a very cheap ink. The sort of stuff that doesn't penetrate the paper to any depth, but merely leaves a mark on the surface. And, if you know how, it's very easy to remove those surface markings.

"If you look at this letter, you'll see that the heading, '10 Silver Lane, Barnsley,' is at the head of the paper, and the signature, 'Hy. Alcott,' very near the bottom. The message part of it is so widely spaced that it fills up the rest of the sheet. In fact, the space between the lines is greater than that between the first line of the heading, '10 Silver Lane,' and the second line, 'Barnsley.'"

"Yes, I see that," said Hanslet. "What's the idea?"

"Just this. Hy. Alcott wrote a fairly closely spaced hand, as the heading shows. His original letter was a good deal longer than the existing one, which brought his signature down to the bottom of the page. The existing letter had therefore to be widely spaced, in order to fill the page naturally.

"Now the letter fairly stinks of chlorine. I have tested it chemically, and found that it has been subjected to some powerful bleaching agent. During the bleaching process, the heading and signature were protected in some way, and were not affected. But the body of the original letter has been completely bleached away, so that it is invisible to the eye. And on the

blank space thus produced the existing message has been written. And the handwriting is not that of Hy. Alcott, though it is quite a competent imitation of it."

"You mean that the letter is a forgery?" Hanslet asked.

"I do. I'm sorry to say that I can't give you the text of the original letter. It is too far gone for any methods of recovery that I know of. But I have been able, by means which I need not explain, to decipher a word here and there. In the first place, the original letter did not begin 'Dere Son' but 'Dere Sir!'

"There is a reference to a son, though. I managed to make out three words together which look like 'only son Chas.' Then a little farther on there's a word which is unmistakably 'War.' Two or three lines farther down there is another group, which I read as 'a few shil——' Finally, the original letter ends 'Yrs respek——' Here's a piece of tracing-paper, the exact size of the letter, on which I have written the words I have managed to decipher. If you put that over the letter, it shows you where the words occurred in the original."

Hanslet thanked the expert, and put the letter and the tracing-paper away in a drawer. It did not seem to him to have any particular significance. The bleaching out of the old letter and the writing of the new was obviously the work of Charles Alcott. Just the sort of dodge a laboratory assistant would be up to.

Yes, that was it, of course. The motive of the forgery was apparent from the wording of it. An invalid father, sorely disappointed that his son could not get home for Christmas! What an irresistible appeal to a soft-hearted employer. No doubt Charles Alcott had prepared the forgery, with tears in his eyes and a request for a week's holiday. Yes, and perhaps his fare to Barnsley and back. Quite a neat dodge, in its way.

But, as a clue to the whereabouts of the missing

Venner, the letter was disappointing. It revealed that Charles Alcott had not been above a little mild deception, certainly. But a man might execute a little harmless forgery without being a potential murderer.

The more Hanslet considered the matter, the more convinced he became that Charles Alcott had nothing to do with Venner's disappearance. There was nothing for it but to go to the fountain-head, and interview Christine Venner for himself.

His first attempt to do so met with a severe check. Christine Venner received him politely enough. But, when she discovered his business, her manner immediately became distant. "I can tell you nothing about my brother, Superintendent," she said. "My solicitor, Mr. Coleforth, has told me to answer no questions about him except in his presence."

So an interview was arranged at Coleforth's office. The atmosphere was unpropitious. Coleforth sat at his desk, with Christine Venner on a chair close beside him, and a window at her back. Hanslet was forced to take a chair opposite to them. And it was Coleforth who opened the conversation. "I understand, Superintendent, that you wish to interrogate my client," he said. "You are aware, of course, that she cannot be compelled to answer any question to which she may take objection?"

"I am aware of that," Hanslet replied stiffly. And with that he put the questions which he had already prepared.

But Christine Venner adhered to her original statement. Ernest Venner had come home from his office on November 15th rather earlier than usual. He had gone out again shortly afterwards, carrying nothing but a small attaché case, which he was in the habit of taking with him to and from the office. He had told her that

he would not be back till late, and that was the last occasion on which she had seen him.

"By the expression 'he would not be back till late' you understood your brother's intention was to return that night?" Hanslet asked.

"I did. I was very much astonished next morning to find that he had not come back."

"You say that he was carrying an attaché case. Have you any idea as to what it contained?"

She shook her head. "Not the slightest. Business papers, I suppose. He always carried it about with him."

"But surely he was not in the habit of taking it with him when he went out in the evening?" Hanslet asked.

"Not if he was going to dinner, or anything like that, of course. As he had the case with him, I supposed that he was going to some business appointment. He didn't tell me where he was going, and I did not ask."

"Do you know how much money your brother had with him when he left home?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. We never discussed money matters together."

"What did you do that evening, Miss Venner, after your brother had gone out?"

"I didn't stay at home and sit up for him. I had an engagement, and went out myself very soon after he had gone."

"Will you tell me where you went to?" Hanslet saw her glance towards Mr. Coleforth, and before she could reply the solicitor interposed. "You need not answer that question, Miss Venner," he said.

Hanslet did not press the point. "As you please," he said. "Is it a fact, Miss Venner, that you have seen or heard nothing whatever of your brother since the evening of November 15th?"

"Nothing whatever, from the moment he left the flat."

"And you have not been able to form the slightest idea of what has become of him?"

"Not the remotest. He took nothing with him except his little attaché case. But, though I have looked all through his clothes and things, I can't find anything that suggests where he might have gone to."

"Thank you, Miss Venner. I need not trouble you any further." Hanslet rose and picked up his hat. Then, as if as an afterthought, he asked, "Are you troubled with mice at Clewer Street, Miss Venner?"

"Mice!" she exclaimed. "Whatever makes you ask that, Superintendent? We were at one time, I remember, but I don't think there are any there now."

Hanslet, by his manœuvre, had managed to get a full view of her face as he put this last question. Rather to his disappointment, her only expression had become one of intense surprise. He left the office, and went back to Scotland Yard in no very good humour.

"It's no good, Jarrold," he said, having summoned the Inspector to a consultation. "I couldn't get anything more out of that girl. She stuck to her original story, and wouldn't budge. There was just one thing. She told me that she went out on the evening of Venner's disappearance, but Coleforth wouldn't let her tell me where she went to. And he knew all right, I could see that."

"She may have followed her brother," Jarrold suggested.

"I shouldn't wonder. I expect she knew well enough where he was bound for, though she swears she didn't. And now, what the devil are we to do next? We can't take any decided steps until we find the body, and we haven't the slightest idea where to look for that.

Dash it! I wish Sir Alured hadn't been at the Professor's that evening!"

Jarrold glanced at him. "Sorry, but I don't quite follow," he remarked.

"No, I don't suppose you do. I was at the Professor's a few days after Venner disappeared, and Faversham was there. We got talking about the case, and he said that it was obvious that Venner had just cleared out of his own accord. His arguments sounded so convincing at the time that I felt he must be right. Of course I didn't know about the vermin killer or the money Venner had drawn from the bank then."

"Nor did Sir Alured Faversham," said Jarrold. "Perhaps he would have changed his opinion if he had."

"Yes, but don't you see? Faversham is the sort of man one can't help listening to. And, after that evening, thinking he was right, I didn't worry my head much about Venner. I didn't try to trace his movements after he left the flat, for instance. And now, of course, it's far too late. Who would remember seeing a casual stranger three months ago? It seems to me that we're fairly beaten, unless the body turns up. And the chances of that, after all this time, are not very great. I think I'll go and have another word with the Professor this evening."

He carried out his intention, taking with him the letter found on Charles Alcott's body, and the sheet of tracing-paper. Dr. Priestley seemed glad enough to see him, but did not inquire the reason of his visit. It was left to Hanslet to open the conversation, which he did by describing his interview with Christine Venner in Mr. Coleforth's presence.

Dr. Priestley listened patiently. "And what conclusions did you come to as a result of your interview?" he asked.

"Nothing very definite, I'm afraid. In fact, Professor, I don't mind telling you that I was a bit disappointed. I expected her to feel rather awkward at some of my questions, but she didn't seem to. In fact, if she was lying, she's a better liar than any woman I've ever had to interrogate. But I'd like to know where it was she went to that evening."

"I think I can hazard a guess at that," replied Dr. Priestley. "Would it astonish you to learn that she is on such friendly terms with Mr. Coleforth that she addresses him as 'Willy'?"

"What? That old ruin?" Hanslet exclaimed. "I thought they were as thick as thieves when I was shown in, but I didn't guess it was as bad as that. I'm surprised at her, that's all I've got to say. You mean, I suppose, that you think they went out together somewhere that evening?"

"I should not be surprised. I know from personal observation that they are in the habit of going out together. And that, I think, would account for Mr. Coleforth's interruption. He is not anxious, I expect, for their intimacy to become known at present."

"Maybe," replied Hanslet, with an air of discouragement. "If that's so, it doesn't help me to find out what's become of Venner, does it? Oh, by the way, Professor, there's something I want to show you. I went down to Weyford to see if I could find out anything definite about that chap Charles Alcott you were telling me about. You remember that letter from his father?"

"I remember it well. It struck me when I saw it that it had been tampered with."

"Tampered with! I should think it had been. I gave it to our expert, and this is what he told me."

Dr. Priestley listened in silence to the expert's report, then took the tracing paper and the letter, and fitted one over the other. He stared at these so long that

Hanslet felt constrained to interrupt his reverie. "Seems to worry you a bit, Professor?" he ventured.

"It is extraordinary!" Dr. Priestley replied slowly. "You see the significance of this? The original letter, though written by Henry Alcott, was not written to his son. The questions immediately arise, who altered the letter to its present form, and for what purpose? And how did it find its way into Charles Alcott's pocket?"

"My idea is that Charles Alcott altered it as an excuse for asking for a holiday," replied Hanslet. "Anyhow, I don't see that it matters much to anybody, I only brought it along to show you, as a curiosity."

"I do not think that Charles Alcott can have altered it. Why should he have kept it for so long after it must have served his purpose? I ascertained while I was in Barnsley, that Henry Alcott was in the habit of writing begging letters, and sending them to people whose names and addresses he saw mentioned in the newspaper. The words which your expert deciphered from the original seem to suggest that it was one of these. It might have read something like this—I will not attempt to reproduce Henry Alcott's peculiar grammar or phraseology:

" 'Dere Sir,

" 'I venture to write to you in hope that you will be kind enough to render me some assistance. I am an old man, without friends or relations to help me, since I have lost my only son Chas., who was drowned at sea while serving his country in the Great War. I am completely destitute, and my disability, due to an accident sustained many years ago, prevents me from seeking even light work. If you could see your way to assisting me, even with a few shillings, I should be most heartily grateful.

" 'I am, Sir,

"Yrs respecktfully,

" 'Hy. Alcott.'

"I do not suggest that was the wording of the letter, or anything like it. But it probably conveys a rough idea of its sense. It would be extremely interesting to know who was the recipient of that letter."

Hanslet considered this point. It was always expedient to humour the Professor, even when he insisted upon attaching undue importance to trifles. "You seemed to think, the other day, that there might be some connection between this Charles Alcott and Venner," said the Superintendent at last. "Now you tell me that Henry Alcott was in the habit of sending that sort of letter to people whose names he saw in the papers. Venner's name was pretty prominently in the papers at the time of the inquest on his uncle."

Dr. Priestley shook his head. "Henry Alcott had been dead seven months by then," he replied.

"Well, then, Venner can't have had anything to do with it. In fact, Professor, since there was no address with this letter, I can't quite see how we are going to guess who it was sent to."

"No. Unfortunately, we cannot guess that. But the motive for the alteration of the letter to its present form is easier to determine. I have always believed that it was in the interest of somebody to ensure that the body of Charles Alcott should be identified beyond question. The fragment of envelope addressed to Sir Alured Faversham was the first precaution. But suppose that, for any reason, Faversham had been prevented from going to Weyford to identify the body? This possibility had to be guarded against, and therefore a second precaution was necessary. This letter, ostensibly from Henry Alcott to his son, was this second precaution. Anyone reading it, and knowing that the dead man's shirt was marked 'Chas. Alcott,' would naturally assume from the letter that he was the son of Henry Alcott."

"Well, as it happens, the letter wasn't necessary," Hanslet replied. "They told me at Weyford that Sir Alured was able to identify the chap at once. But you're not suggesting, are you, Professor, that somebody happened to come along when the man was lying by the roadside and put these bits of paper in his pocket?"

"I think that the circumstances surrounding Charles Alcott's death have never yet been satisfactorily explained."

Hanslet shrugged his shoulders. "Well, the people on the spot are happy enough about it," he replied. "And after all, they investigated the matter at the time. I'll admit that it's a queer thing about that letter, but I still think that Charles Alcott himself must have faked it. He may have had some reason for wanting to carry about with him something which would prove his identity. He was a bit of a shady customer, I fancy. Nobody seems to know where he came from that evening. Anyhow, Professor, I didn't come here this evening to worry you about Charles Alcott. What I really want to know is whether you have any further suggestions to make about Venner?"

"I have nothing to add to the suggestions which I have already made," Dr. Priestley replied.

"Then I shan't trouble myself any more about the case," Hanslet said, with almost an air of relief. "Heaven knows there are plenty of other things to be done without looking for a man who may be alive or may be dead."

"Does that imply that the police will automatically lose all interest in Venner's disappearance?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"Not exactly that. It means that we shall take no active steps unless something fresh turns up. But, as I was saying the other day, the Yard never forgets, nor does it ever lose sight of a case. The records are always

there ready for reference at any time. But somehow, I feel that it will be a long time before anyone has occasion to turn up the Venner file again."

Hanslet stayed talking for a little longer before he left the house. When he had gone, Dr. Priestley took out his own dossier relating to the Venner case, and turned its contents over idly. The disappearance of Venner was surrounded with as much mystery as it had been when he had drawn up his first sheet of notes. More, perhaps, for since then stray particles of evidence had accumulated which it seemed impossible to fit together.

Dr. Priestley frowned. He hated, beyond anything else, the abandonment of an unsolved problem. But in this case, persistence was becoming very like obstinacy. His friends were sick of the whole thing. Faversham had said as much, long ago. Even Oldland had recommended him to forget it. And now Superintendent Hanslet, representing the police, had decided to relegate the case to the oblivion of a pigeon-hole.

Surely, Dr. Priestley thought, it was high time that he should find a new problem upon which to exercise his ingenuity. He looked at the papers in front of him regretfully, then impatiently pushed them aside.

The evening paper lay on his desk, and he opened it at random. But the news it contained failed to capture his attention. The strange series of puzzles, of which Venner was the centre, refused to be dismissed from his mind. The paper dropped from his hand, and for a long time he sat with head thrown back, staring at the ceiling.

At last he frowned sharply, started from his chair, and began a restless pacing of the room. His agitation displayed itself in his every movement. From time to time he glanced at the dossier, with an expression of aversion and horror.

Then, impulsively, he gathered up the papers, crumpling them as he did so with the nervous energy of his fingers. He tore them across and across, then pressed the fragments into the dying fire upon the hearth. They charred, and then burst into flame.

Not until the last vestige of ash had disappeared did Dr. Priestley turn away, and go slowly upstairs to bed.

V

THE DUEL

I

FOR the next few days Dr. Priestley was possessed by a demon of industry. He set to work upon a new scientific treatise, which demanded the most elaborate research, and he scarcely allowed either himself or his secretary time for meals and sleep.

This period lasted for a fortnight, and might have continued indefinitely, but for Oldland, who literally forced his way into Dr. Priestley's study. "Look here, Priestley!" he said, after a rapid glance at his old friend. "I don't know what you're playing at, these days, but it's got to stop. Merefield has been telling me that you're working yourself to death, and I can see with half an eye the effect it's having on you. Go a bit easier, like a good chap. We're none of us as young as we were, you know."

Dr. Priestley frowned. His face was certainly lined and haggard, and he looked as if he had not been sleeping properly. "It is no part of Merefield's duties to consult you on the subject of my health, Oldland," he said coldly.

"Rot!" exclaimed Oldland. "You're lucky to have a secretary who's capable of looking after you properly. Now look here. You've shut yourself away from everybody for goodness knows how long, and I don't suppose you've been out of this stuffy room all that time. Too busy, you say. Yes, I know, but you'll break down, like any fool who doesn't know how to take care

of himself, if you keep this up. I don't ask you to stop working, but to take a rest occasionally. And I'm going to see that you do it, too. Here and now I invite myself to dine with you to-morrow evening."

Oldland's emphatic manner was irresistible, and Dr. Priestley's stern expression relaxed a trifle. "Hard work never killed anybody yet," he replied. "However, under the circumstances I have no option but to beg you to accept your own invitation."

"Good!" Oldland exclaimed. "I'll be round at the usual time." And without wasting any more words he went away. But when he got home, he rang up Sir Alured Faversham.

"Hallo, that you, Faversham? Look here, I've just been to see Priestley, and I don't like the look of him. He's been shutting himself up with those confounded books of his. Preparing some epoch-making work or other, Merefield tells me. What he wants is a little cheerful conversation to shake him up a bit."

"I'm glad you've seen him," Faversham replied. "I've rung him up once or twice, and suggested going round, but he put me off every time."

"He'd have put me off, if I'd given him the chance. But I didn't. I just butted in and invited myself to dinner with him to-morrow. I'm bound to say that he agreed, not too ungraciously. And since I'm going to spoil his evening for him anyhow, he can't resent you blowing in afterwards. Why don't you look in and help me out? It'll do him the world of good to have somebody to talk to."

"All right. I don't mind looking in about ten o'clock for an hour or so. But if he chucks us both out, it'll be your fault."

Oldland said nothing of his conspiracy when he reached Westbourne Terrace on the following evening. At first, he found it very difficult to interest Dr. Priest-

ley in any subject which he could hit upon. His host, though courteous enough, seemed to have his mind fixed upon something inaccessibly remote. That confounded treatise, Oldland supposed.

But as dinner came to an end, and they adjourned to the study, Dr. Priestley became more like his normal self. He seemed to make an effort to concentrate his thoughts upon Oldland's conversation, and though he took no great part in it, he listened with intelligent interest to his guest's stories. And then, shortly after ten o'clock, Faversham was announced.

Dr. Priestley frowned at the arrival of this second visitor. Oldland, watching him, believed for the moment that his scheme had failed, and that Dr. Priestley was going to tell the parlourmaid that he could not see Faversham. But after a moment or two, the frown relaxed, and he nodded. "Show Sir Alured in, Mary," he said. "And bring the sherry."

Faversham came in, and tactfully made no allusion to his previous attempts. "I thought I'd look round on the chance that you wouldn't be too busy for a chat," he said. "Hallo, Oldland, you here too. Excellent. You won't either of you mind if I talk shop, will you? I came across a very queer thing the other day, which ought to interest you both."

He plunged into a long description of a very curious case upon which he had been consulted. To Oldland's satisfaction, Dr. Priestley seemed to display a vivid interest in his account. He listened attentively, putting in questions from time to time.

But at last the subject was exhausted, and silence fell upon the room. Oldland saw the shadows settle once more upon Dr. Priestley's face, and searched his mind desperately for some fresh topic. He could think of nothing better than that now forgotten subject which the three of them had so often discussed in that very

room. "Have you ever thought any more about that chap Venner, Priestley?" he asked abruptly.

Dr. Priestley's face contracted nervously. "I have put that case entirely out of my mind," he replied.

But Oldland was not to be put off. "Just as well," he said. "You came to the conclusion that the problem was insoluble, of course?"

Dr. Priestley seemed not to hear the question. He glanced at the fire, then got up and put a log upon it with exaggerated care. The flames shot up round it before he spoke. "On the contrary, I put the problem out of my mind because I had succeeded in solving it to my complete satisfaction. But for certain reasons, I do not propose to discuss that solution with you."

This devastating remark was followed by an awkward silence. It was Faversham who came to the rescue. "By the way, Priestley," he said. "When I was at the Home Office the other day, I heard a yarn which ought to amuse you. It was the Home Secretary himself who told it to me. He said——"

This story led to others, and after a while a genial atmosphere was restored. And then a message came that Oldland was wanted on the telephone. He held a brief conversation and then hurried back to the study. "Sorry, Priestley," he said. "I shall have to clear off. Urgent call from one of my patients. Many thanks for a very pleasant evening."

Faversham stayed on. His fund of stories was not exhausted. But they came to an end at last. Then after a silence, during which he poured out a glass of sherry, he asked, "Does your disinclination to discuss the solution of the Venner problem with Oldland extend to me as well?"

For some moments Dr. Priestley made no reply. He seemed to be considering what answer he should make.

And when he spoke, it was in a completely dispassionate tone. " No, I do not think that it extends to you."

" Then I would very much like to hear it," said Faversham. " I confess that I never believed that a solution would be found."

" You shall hear the solution that I have arrived at," Dr. Priestley replied gravely. " For many reasons, I do not expect you to agree that it is the correct one. But you shall judge for yourself.

" Venner's disappearance was the second act in a drama which began some months before. In the early part of last year, his financial position was desperate. He had liabilities which he could not meet, and there was no prospect of his business affairs improving. He dared not ask his uncle for assistance, knowing that it would be refused. Nor had he any expectations from his uncle, for at that time Mr. Hinchliffe had made a will, leaving his fortune to Christine Venner.

" Venner, faced with bankruptcy, resolved upon a very desperate course. His first step was to endeavour to persuade his uncle to alter his will in his own favour. This was not so difficult as might have appeared at first sight. Mr. Hinchliffe was not an old man, and had no idea of saving money for his heirs. He did not anticipate that much of his fortune would be left at his death. It was therefore immaterial to him who was his normal heir."

Faversham nodded. " I don't know where you gathered all this information, Priestley," he said. " But you may be right. My acquaintance with Hinchliffe did not begin until after his death."

" My information is from a source which I consider reliable. But to continue. Venner became aware that his uncle's solicitor, Mr. Coleforth, was desirous of marrying his sister. He conveyed this information to Mr. Hinchliffe, insinuating that Coleforth's object was

a purely mercenary one. As Venner had anticipated, this so annoyed Hinchliffe that he promptly altered his will in his nephew's favour. More, I think, to spite Coleforth than with any intention that Venner should derive any benefit.

"This was early in May. Four days earlier a rather curious incident had occurred. Miss Venner had bought two tins of Iver's Vermin Killer. She did this quite openly and made no difficulty about signing the chemist's poison book. Iver's Vermin Killer consists, as you may know, of a mixture of flour and strychnine, with ultramarine added as a colouring agent."

"Did Oldland know that when he refused to sign Hinchliffe's death certificate?" asked Faversham, fingering his glass thoughtfully.

"He did not. The discovery was not made until after Venner's disappearance. I am not inclined to attach any significance to the actual purchase of the Vermin Killer. Miss Venner probably bought it for a perfectly legitimate purpose, that of killing mice. She probably used one of the tins for this purpose, and put the other aside. Her brother saw it, and it suggested to him a means of furthering his designs.

"However, to return to Mr. Hinchliffe. After a stay in Scotland, he decided to spend August at the Mermaid Hotel, Bindon-on-Sea, which he had previously visited. Venner, learning of this, went to see the proprietor, Mr. Millington, shortly before his uncle's arrival. He expressed solicitude for his uncle's health, and gave Millington instructions how to act in case his uncle should be taken ill under his roof.

"Those instructions seemed reasonable enough. Millington was to send a telegram to Venner, and call in a doctor. But as it happened, Hinchliffe had a violent dislike of the medical profession, amounting almost to mania, a fact of which Venner was fully aware.

"As it happened, Hinchliffe, towards the end of August, contracted a severe influenza cold. He sent for some ammoniated quinine, which he mixed with his favourite drink, rum and creme-de-menthe. But since this treatment did not appear to afford him much relief, Millington thought proper to act upon Venner's instructions.

"The result, as Venner had foreseen, was a violent scene. Hinchliffe, furious at the mention of a doctor, and considering that Millington was guilty of interfering with his personal affairs, threatened to leave the hotel at once, and took steps to do so. Venner appeared at the critical moment, accompanied by his sister. He probably thought that her persuasion would be more efficacious than his own. But very little persuasion was actually required to induce Hinchliffe to return with the Venners to their flat in London.

"Here the course of ammoniated quinine, taken in rum and creme-de-menthe, was continued. But Hinchliffe did not recover. He was seized with the symptoms which Oldland has described, and died on September 3rd."

Faversham stifled a yawn. "All this is ancient history, Priestley!" he exclaimed. "I really don't see that it helps to solve the mystery of Venner's disappearance. Hinchliffe died, as you say. Oldland considered the circumstances suspicious, and I was appointed to carry out a post-mortem. As a result, I found that Hinchliffe died of tetanus, the infection having almost certainly been acquired through an injury to the hand. Venner explained at the inquest that the injury had been caused by a broken wing of the car he was driving when he fetched his uncle from Bindon-on-Sea."

"So I understand. But it is a remarkable fact that a garage attendant tore his hand on the same wing, shortly afterwards, without sustaining any ill effect."

"Oh, there's nothing in that," Faversham replied, shrugging his shoulders. "The fellow's natural resistance to infection was greater than Hinchliffe's, that's all."

"Possibly. But it is a remarkable thing that, after Venner had laid his plans so carefully, his uncle should have died of tetanus, accidentally acquired. It would have been so easy for Venner to have added the Vermin Killer to the ammoniated quinine mixture. It would have made only an imperceptible difference to its taste or smell."

"But, damn it, Priestley, I tell you he didn't!" Faversham exclaimed angrily. "You don't think I'm such an incompetent fool as not to be able to detect the presence of strychnine if it existed, do you? Especially when Oldland had told me that strychnine was the very thing he suspected?"

"I am perfectly satisfied that you made no mistake in deciding the cause of Hinchliffe's death," Dr. Priestley replied. "But let us return to Venner. He was now not only relieved from his financial embarrassments, but he had become a comparatively wealthy man. Curiously enough, however, he displayed no signs of relief. His mind, as I am credibly informed, seemed more disturbed than ever. Under the circumstances, this cannot be attributed to grief at his uncle's death. It would almost seem as though he was in some way responsible for what had happened."

"Still harping on the same string!" Faversham exclaimed. "He was probably upset by the inquest, and all the fuss attaching to it."

"I hardly think that was the whole cause of his distress. However, he took steps to meet his liabilities. And at the earliest possible opportunity, he drew no less a sum than thirty thousand pounds from the bank. This

was during the afternoon of November 15th. And that evening he disappeared."

"Well, surely that goes to prove what I said all along," Faversham remarked. "He fully intended to disappear. And, naturally, he couldn't clear out without taking a substantial sum of money with him."

"I do not think that he intended to disappear. I think that he drew this money in order to pay somebody who had a claim upon him. And I think that person had stipulated that payment was to be made in currency which could not easily be traced. In all probability, he had an appointment to hand over the thirty thousand pounds on the evening of November 15th and he was on his way to keep that appointment when he left home."

"This is getting interesting," said Faversham quietly. "Have you been able to guess where Venner's meeting with this unknown person was to take place?"

Dr. Priestley hesitated. He picked up a pencil, and after several attempts, succeeded in standing it on its end on the leather surface of his desk. Then almost casually, he spoke. "I have an idea that he took a train to Weyford, and thence walked to Markheys. After the interview, he intended to take the last train back to London. This would explain his statement to his sister that he would not be back till late."

Faversham was so taken aback that he could only stare at his friend in amazement. "I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about, Priestley," he said, after an interval. "Why should the appointment have been fixed at Markheys, of all places in the world?"

"Because the house was unoccupied, and its situation isolated. Two men could meet there without the slightest fear of observation. Especially if one of them possessed a key by which he could enter the house. By the way,

have you received your electricity account for the last quarter yet?"

Faversham started, nearly overturning his glass of sherry. "My electric light bill, you mean? What in the name of sanity has my electric light bill got to do with Venner?"

"Unless I am very much mistaken, there is a vital connection between the two. Perhaps you may remember, some time ago—on November 21st last, to be exact—talking to me in this room about Markheys. You told me that you had built a laboratory there, and equipped it with every convenience, including a cold storage plant. That plant includes an electrically driven refrigerator, I suppose?"

Faversham merely nodded. He seemed too fascinated by Dr. Priestley's words for speech.

"Somebody had gained access to your laboratory on the evening of November 15th," Dr. Priestley said gravely. "The same person to whom Venner's payment was to be made. That is why the appointment was made at Markheys. Venner kept the appointment. He never left the house alive."

"Nonsense!" Faversham exclaimed, with a rather forced laugh. "You mean that he was murdered at Markheys that night? Hang it all, Priestley, I'm prepared to listen to anything in reason, but that's ridiculous."

"You may consider it so, if it pleases you to do so. For my part, I am convinced that he was murdered that night, and by the person with whom he had made the appointment. The motive for the murder I can only conjecture.

"This, I think, is a rough outline of what happened. All that I have been able to learn of Venner between the time of his uncle's death and his own disappearance seems to point to a sense of guilt and of remorse. He

had a crime upon his conscience, and the person to whom he was to pay the money was his accomplice in that crime. He resolved to discharge his obligations and then to confess and accept the consequences.

"But his accomplice became aware of his intentions, and saw that he must become involved. He therefore decided to murder Venner before he could act. His method was this. By some means he rendered Venner unconscious, and then placed him in the refrigerating chamber. The result was Venner's death as the result of exposure to extreme cold."

Faversham was staring at his host with wide open eyes, but still he said nothing. And Dr. Priestley continued. "The body was safe enough in the refrigerator for the time. It would not suffer any putrefactive changes. But it could not, obviously, be left there indefinitely. Nor could it be moved far from Markheys. A body is a very difficult thing to transport without detection.

"The problem before the murderer was this. The body must be found in the neighbourhood of Markheys, but under circumstances which would arouse no suspicion. And his solution of this problem was, in my opinion, extraordinarily ingenious. He staged the finding of the body in such a way that it was falsely identified, and that death was assumed to have taken place two months later than was actually the case.

"To deal first with the false identification. The murderer had at some time received a begging letter from a certain Henry Alcott, of 10 Silver Lane, Barnsley. This letter he kept, perhaps as a curiosity. It informed him that Henry Alcott had had a son Charles, drowned at sea during the war. Later, an article in one of the medical journals caught his eye, and from it he learnt that Henry Alcott had died last February.

"He decided to transform the body of Venner into

that of Charles Alcott. For this purpose he bleached out the matter of Henry Alcott's letter, and copying his handwriting, inserted in its place a message purporting to be addressed to his son. This would suggest that the belief that Charles Alcott had been drowned was incorrect. There was no great improbability attached to this. Cases have been known of persons having reappeared after the war, during which they had been reported as missing. Henry Alcott, being dead, could not refute the identification of Venner's body, as that of his son.

"But more positive evidence of identification than this was necessary. The murderer found an envelope addressed to you, and in order to avoid awkward questions, tore out the name and address, so that it was not apparent that they had been written on an envelope. The discovery of this piece of paper suggested, as the murderer had anticipated, that the dead man was known to you. It also explained his presence in the vicinity of Markheys. He was intending to apply to you for assistance.

"The final step was to destroy Venner's clothing, and to secure other garments, suggesting a condition of extreme poverty. The murderer marked the collar band of the shirt with the name 'Chas. Alcott.' He put a few coppers, and the documents he had already prepared, into the pockets, and reclothed the body. Everything was now in readiness. He had only to wait an opportunity of exposing the body.

"This opportunity was afforded by the severe frost which occurred during the third week in January. The murderer proceeded to Markheys on the evening of January 18th. He took the body from the refrigerator, which had been running continually since November 15th, involving a considerable consumption of current, ten or eleven units a day, in fact. He then transported

the body to a suitable spot in the road, just outside the gates of Markheys. Possibly he employed a wheelbarrow for this purpose. The key of the potting-shed was available as we know. The body had no chance to thaw, owing to the intense cold. Shortly afterwards, the snow fell, and concealed the body until the men clearing the road found it on the following Saturday."

"You seem to forget, Priestley, that I identified the body as that of Charles Alcott, a former laboratory assistant of mine." Faversham's voice was dry and harsh.

"I do not forget," Dr. Priestley replied. "I can only assume that you were the victim of suggestion."

"That's all nonsense, of course," said Faversham. He picked up his glass, and drank the contents at a gulp. "In fact, the whole of your theory strikes me as a not very plausible fairy tale. Have you imparted it to anybody besides myself?"

"I have not. You heard me refuse to speak of it to Oldland just now."

"I'm glad of that. I shouldn't like anyone to have doubts of your sanity." Faversham relapsed into silence, then continued abruptly. "All damned nonsense, of course. But that's an uncomfortable idea of yours that somebody might have got into Markheys. I shan't be able to rest till I've been down to have a look over the place. I'll go down to-morrow, first thing."

Dr. Priestley nodded. "I think it would be a wise precaution," he replied quietly.

"Precaution!" Faversham exclaimed. "It's only to set my mind at rest. Look here, Priestley, could you manage to come along later? We could disprove your precious theory. I shall know at once if anybody has been running about the laboratory. And I can show you over the place at the same time. There's a very good train from Waterloo at 2.10. I'll get the car out.

and meet you at Weyford station. Then we can come back to London together in the evening."

Dr. Priestley considered this invitation for a moment. "Yes, I will come," he replied.

2

Next morning Merefield was surprised to find that his employer's passion for work had apparently evaporated. Dr. Priestley, instead of dictating notes for his treatise, occupied himself in writing letters, which he gave to Merefield with certain instructions. Then after an early lunch, he took a taxi to Waterloo and caught the 2.10 to Weyford.

Faversham was waiting for him with his car. He seemed preoccupied as they covered the couple of miles to Markheys, but he assured Dr. Priestley that his suspicions were unfounded. "There's no sign of anybody but Mrs. Waller, the caretaker, having been inside the place," he said. "You shall see for yourself when we get there. However, your time won't be wasted. There are one or two things in the laboratory that you will be interested to see."

He drove the car round the house to the garage, and put it in. "This is part of the new wing I built when I bought the place," he said. "I arranged it so that I could come and go without disturbing anybody else. There's a way from the garage into the laboratory. Come along, I'll show you."

He led the way through a short passage, with a door at each end, into a magnificently equipped laboratory. Dr. Priestley glanced swiftly round it. Against one wall stood a massive white-enamelled cabinet, which he recognised as an unusually large electric refrigerator.

"Not a bad place, is it?" Faversham asked. "I'm

very proud of it, I don't mind telling you. Here, take a chair, and sit down for a moment. We'll look round afterwards."

He pushed forward a wooden arm-chair, in which Dr. Priestley seated himself. Then Faversham swung himself into a sitting position on one of the benches. "That's better!" he said. And then his voice dropped. "We're safe between these four walls," he continued. "I've just sent Mrs. Waller home, I didn't think we wanted her hanging about the house. In fact, I don't suppose there's a living being within a mile of us, so there isn't the least danger of our being overheard. And I want to ask you a question, Priestley. Who do you believe killed Ernest Venner?"

A strange look, almost of sympathy, came into Dr. Priestley's eyes. "You know the answer to that question already, Faversham," he replied quietly. "Need we go into the matter any further?"

Faversham laughed bitterly. "Need we go into the matter!" he exclaimed. "Dash it all, man. What are you made of? Do you think for a moment, that I can be content to leave it at that?"

Dr. Priestley sighed. "We have known one another a good many years, Faversham," he replied. "Cannot you be content that we should each keep our own secrets?"

As Dr. Priestley spoke, Faversham opened a drawer in the bench beneath him, and inserted his hand. With a sudden movement he withdrew it, and pointed a vicious looking automatic in his visitor's direction. "Sorry, Priestley," he haid half-apologetically. "But surely you must understand that I've got to make you speak."

Dr. Priestley frowned as though at a flagrant breach of good manners. "If you insist, I will speak without this unnecessarily theatrical display," he replied. "But

let me first give you a piece of advice. You will gain nothing by killing me. I had already foreseen the possibility of such an idea occurring to you. Superintendent Hanslet is by now in possession of a note from me, asking him to meet us both here at six o'clock. If he does not find us here, he has instructions to ask Merefield for a certain sealed envelope, which contains my theory of Venner's disappearance, and a suggestion that the body of Denis Hinchliffe should be exhumed."

"Damn you, Priestley!" exclaimed Faversham viciously. "And if Hanslet finds us both here, what then?"

"Then you may say what you please to him. I give you my word that I shall not contradict you."

Faversham shook his head. "It's no good, Priestley," he replied. "We can't just go on as we were. You know too much. But don't think I'm going to shoot you in cold blood. I couldn't do that. As you said just now, we've known one another too long. But I shall have a proposition to make in a few minutes. Hanslet is to turn up at six o'clock, you say? It's only just four now. We've got plenty of time."

He lowered the automatic but kept it in his hand, watching Dr. Priestley as a cat watches a mouse. "We may as well be perfectly frank with one another," he continued. "How do you know that I killed Venner?"

"By a natural process of logic," replied Dr. Priestley. "You heard my theory, which I venture to think is the only possible one, last night. Considered as a mathematical process, it has two indeterminate quantities. The first of these is your evidence at the inquest on Hinchliffe. The second is your identification of the body under the snow as that of Charles Alcott. If these two quantities can be eliminated, the solution is apparent."

"And how do you propose to eliminate them?" asked Faversham.

"I will show you. Let us take them in turn. Do not for a moment suppose that I did you the injustice of believing you to have been mistaken over your post-mortem on Hinchliffe's body. If strychnine had been present, I knew that you would have detected it. And yet I felt convinced that Hinchliffe must have died of strychnine poisoning.

"Then, your identification of the body as that of Charles Alcott. You were the only person called upon to give evidence of identification, and your evidence, under the circumstances, was naturally accepted. Now, supposing that in both cases your evidence had been false. That made the problem soluble. But it also pointed to you as the criminal. And that, viewing the knowledge which I had collected, was the only conclusion to which I could arrive."

"Your logic is all very fine, Priestley," Faversham replied sneeringly. "But you can't prove anything against me."

"I could not prove that you murdered Venner. But the exhumation of Hinchliffe's body would prove that your evidence at the inquest was false. And that would lead to further inquiries."

Faversham laughed mirthlessly. "That's why I had to kill Venner," he said. "It's not a bit of good beating about the bush any longer. I killed him, and serve him right. The man was a murderer, by his own confession. If I hadn't killed him, he would have hanged anyhow. Let me assure you that I feel not the slightest remorse.

"What you said last night is correct as far as it goes. But Venner didn't work out an elaborate scheme for murdering his uncle. He wasn't that sort of chap, he hadn't enough pluck or determination. All he wanted

was to earn his uncle's favour. He got the will changed, and he contrived, by his manœuvres at Bindon-on-Sea, to get Hinchliffe up to the flat. He thought that he could work on his uncle's gratitude to induce him to lend him the few thousands he wanted so badly.

"That's what he told me, anyhow, and I'm inclined to believe him. But he couldn't pluck up sufficient courage to say anything to his uncle until the day before his death. And as soon as he broached the subject, Hinchliffe told him to go to hell. That upset him a bit, as you might suppose. He couldn't sleep for wondering what the devil he was going to do. And then, prowling round the place in search of something to soothe his nerves, he came upon that Vermin Killer stuff in the medicine cupboard. His sister must have put it there and forgotten all about it.

"After that, he couldn't get the stuff out of his head. There was the old man, lying in bed, with a couple of hundred thousand in the bank. And there was the Vermin Killer. I'll leave you to analyse his mental processes. Anyway, at last he screwed himself up to the point of adding the Vermin Killer to that infernal medicine which Hinchliffe had prescribed for himself.

"Well, you know what happened. But when Oldland refused to give a certificate, he felt that he was done for. He knew enough to see what would happen. A post-mortem, and the discovery of strychnine in his uncle's body. By jove! He must have felt the rope round his neck already. He was on the point of going round to see Oldland and blurting out the whole story, when he thought of a better plan. He came round to see me instead.

"Most people who read their newspapers know that I'm called in on these occasions. That's what sent him to me. He can't have believed really that it would do any good. It's a pretty tall order to try to bribe a

Home Office pathologist. But people of Venner's temparament and in his position have a way of clutching at the most ridiculous straws.

"Of course, you'll say that I ought never to have listened to him. I quite agree. But even you, Priestley, don't know how hard hit I was by that Carne Trust crash. Everything that I had saved had gone, and I could see that there was not the remotest chance of getting a penny of it back. I had to face the necessity of giving up this place, taking a villa in the suburbs somewhere, and scraping along as best I could. And at our time of life it isn't easy to reconcile oneself to so complete a change as that."

Dr. Priestley nodded. "I can fully understand the temptation," he said.

"Oh, I'm not trying to justify myself. It's too late for that. And just as I was feeling that suicide would be a preferable alternative, in walks Venner. Lord, how the man talked! His flow of words fascinated me. And I saw quick enough that here was a way out of my difficulty. Hinchliffe was dead, anyhow. I couldn't bring him to life again. And what possible good could it do to anybody, if Venner were hanged by the neck until he died, too? Certainly, it wouldn't have done me any good.

"The end of it was, I bargained with him. Thirty thousand pounds was a rough estimate of what I had lost, and this sum he agreed to pay as soon as he could lay hands on his uncle's money. And naturally, I stipulated that payment should be made in notes of small denominations and dollar bills, which could not easily be traced.

"I stuck to my part of the bargain. Venner had told me about the cut on his uncle's hand, and I saw my way out. I conducted the post-mortem alone, having managed to put Oldland off. I had to invite him to

attend in the first place, as I didn't want the slightest suspicion to be aroused. And I tell you, Priestley, Hinchliffe's body was full of strychnine. I removed most of the organs and destroyed them. But, of course, I couldn't eliminate the poison altogether. That didn't matter, though. My evidence was unquestioned, and the body was duly buried.

"I hadn't any doubts that Venner would come up to scratch. He may have been a murderer, but he was scrupulously honest as far as business was concerned. And on November 13th he let me know that he would be ready to pay in two days time.

"As you may imagine, we were neither of us anxious to be seen together. Obviously, the safest place for a rendezvous after dark was Markheys. I told Venner to take the train to Weyford, and walk to the house, where I would meet him. He was to catch a train at Waterloo shortly after half-past six, and be at Markheys by half-past eight.

"Since I had no desire to be recognised at Weyford station, where I am well known, I went by a different route, which entailed a longish walk across country. Unknown to anybody, I had kept a key of the house, and with this I let myself in. Venner arrived to time, and I brought him in here. In fact, he sat down in the very chair which you are occupying now. And that's rather queer, when you come to think about it."

Faversham's smile was rather ghastly, but Dr. Priestley merely nodded and said nothing.

"I hadn't been mistaken in my estimate of Venner's character," Faversham continued. "The first thing he did was to open an attaché case he had with him and count out thirty thousand pounds in dollar bills, and small notes. But it struck me, even then, that there was something queer about him. He had a sort of half-

conscious look, like a man performing one action, while all the time his mind was fixed upon another.

"You were quite right, Priestley, and it was devilish smart of you to guess what had happened. Venner hadn't enough guts to carry him through. He had committed a crime, on the impulse of the moment. He had, more by good luck than good judgment, found the only way in which that crime could be hidden. And then, at the very moment he had reaped the benefit, his pluck, or his conscience, or whatever you like to call it, had given way. He simply couldn't carry on any longer.

"I can see him now, sitting in that chair, the very picture of irresolution, twitching all over. And he told me that the first thing he was going to do next day was to pay a call on Scotland Yard and make a clean breast of it.

"Jolly for me, wasn't it? I saw at once what that would mean. The exhumation of Hinchliffe's body, and a fresh examination which could not fail to reveal the presence of strychnine. At the best, I should stand convicted of an unpardonable mistake, which would put an end to my career. And at the worst—well, I didn't care to contemplate that.

"I didn't let him see that I was in any way perturbed, but I began to reason with him. Not that I had the least hope that it would be any good. I knew his type too well. I might have persuaded him to change him mind for the moment, but sooner or later his irresolution would have returned. I knew that I could never feel safe for a moment until he was dead.

"That's why I started to argue with him. I wanted time to think. I could kill him easily enough. There was no difficulty about that. There are means in this laboratory of killing a dozen men almost instantane-

easily. But how was I to kill him without bringing any suspicion upon myself?

"It's wonderful how quickly one's brain works in an emergency like that. I had the general plan settled in something like five minutes. The details could be worked out later.

"I told him that if he had made up his mind to confess, there was nothing more to be said. If he wanted to catch the last train to London, I would get out the car and drive him to the station. I took him through the passage to the garage. And then I said that I had forgotten to put the notes in a place of safety. If he would wait where he was for a few minutes, I would come back.

"As it happened, I had a cylinder of carbon monoxide nearly full, which I had been using for some experiments. I came in here and fetched it, carried it into the passage, and turned it on. Then I came back in here, shut the door, and waited.

"You know, of course, that carbon monoxide will knock a man out pretty quickly. And since it is absolutely odourless, the victim doesn't know of his danger until he collapses. I waited for a goodish bit, then put on a mask and went into the garage. And there, as I had expected, was Venner, crumpled up in a heap on the floor.

"He wasn't dead, only unconscious. He would have recovered right enough if I had carried him out into the open air. But that wasn't part of my plan. I brought him in here, put him in the refrigerator, and switched on the current. I didn't look at him again just then, but I'm pretty sure that the cold killed him before he recovered consciousness.

"Then I went back to London by the same way as I came. Venner was safe enough where he was, since nobody but myself had access to the laboratory. And

the next thing I heard of him was when Hanslet brought up his name in your study. I got a lot of fun out of that discussion. And I flatter myself that I pretty well persuaded the Superintendent that my theory of Venner's disappearance was the correct one.

"But, of course, Venner couldn't stay where he was indefinitely. For one thing he would be most damnably in the way when I came back here, as I fully intended to, now that I had that thirty thousand pounds. I had to dispose of his body somehow, and the safest way of doing that seemed to me to have it buried under another name.

"Again, Priestley, you were perfectly right, confound you. I had a begging letter from Henry Alcott, which I kept as a curiosity. And I had seen an article on his death in the *Lancet*. I decided that Charles Alcott should reappear, and that I should be called upon to identify him as a wholly mythical former laboratory assistant. The game was perfectly safe, if I could carry it out.

"And carry it out I did. It needed a spell of frosty weather, and for the time being I became a student of meteorology. You can imagine the care with which I followed the forecasts and the weather charts. And you were very near the truth once, Priestley, though you didn't know it then. Do you remember a night when I had promised to come round and see you after dinner, and didn't turn up? It was freezing, and had begun to snow, and a few days later you said you thought the weather had kept me away? It had, by jove! I had come down here, all ready to deposit Venner by the roadside. But the frost broke up, and I left him where he was.

"I was all ready, even then. I had rummaged about in old clothes shops in the East End, and bought quite a convincing rigout for my purposes. I put a few

pers and the two pieces of paper in the pockets, and arked the collar band of the shirt. And with some difficulty I managed to fit them on to Venner.

My opportunity came at last, on January 18th, and ything went off according to plan. I knew that the bon monoxide dodge would never be discovered. bon monoxide produces a bright colour in the blood, so does exposure to extreme cold, so there would be ing suspicious in that. And with the utmost mnity I warned Doctor Gainsford to take nothing granted.

All would have been well if I hadn't met Oldland Waterloo on the day I came down here to identify the y. That didn't matter so much in itself, but it drew attention to the paragraph in the paper about the uest. And he must needs cut that out and show it you. And you, in turn, with your confounded insitiveness, must poke your nose into matters that n't concern you."

Faversham broke off suddenly, and glanced at his tch. "Quarter past five," he continued. "We've nty of time. You'll admit, Priestley, that this is an ernally awkward situation. Altogether apart from the t that Hanslet is due on the scene very shortly, I n't kill you in cold blood. We're much too old friends that. And yet, you knowing what you do, we can't h go on living. You might be content to keep your owledge to yourself, but we should never be comtable in one another's company again, should we?"

"I realise the difficulty," replied Dr. Priestley ietly. "What steps do you propose to take in the atter?"

"Surely, that ought to be obvious," replied Faversm. "In spite of the refinements of civilisation, only e honourable course remains to two men in the unrtunate position in which we find ourselves. Our an-

which, even taken in minute doses, paralyses the muscles of the heart. And it has the further advantage that it leaves no traces. I have tried it on a dozen animals, all of whom died perfectly painlessly within a few minutes. But in no case could any trace of the drug be found in their bodies subsequently.

"Now, what I propose is this, Priestley. I have here two identical watch-glasses. One of these contains five grains of this drug, and the other five grains of bicarbonate of soda. Which is which, I do not know myself. They are absolutely identical in appearance. But, lest you should think that I am not playing fair, the choice shall be yours. Would you mind coming over here?"

Dr. Priestley rose, to find that the muzzle of the automatic exactly followed his movements. On the bench beside Faversham lay the two watch-glasses, each containing a tiny heap of a white powder. As Faversham had said, they looked exactly alike. There was no possible means of distinguishing between them by inspection alone.

"You'll find a couple of beakers in front of you, and there's water in the tap," said Faversham, without changing his position.

Dr. Priestley tipped the contents of the watch-glasses, one into each beaker. Then with a steady hand, he ran a little water into each in turn. By the aid of stirring with a glass rod, the powders slowly dissolved.

Faversham watched his actions with a queer smile. "That'll do," he said. "I haven't the remotest notion which is which, and I'm perfectly sure that you haven't. Now then, hand one of them over; I promise you that they won't taste as bad as Hinchliffe's cocktail."

Without the slightest hesitation Dr. Priestley picked up one of the beakers, and gave it to Faversham, who held it up to the light. "Yes, it's all dissolved," he

said. "Well, here's to our friendship! I wonder how often I've said that over a glass of your excellent sherry. Eh, Priestley?"

He put the beaker to his mouth, and drank off its contents at a gulp. Dr. Priestley followed his example, and for a second or two they stood motionless, staring questioningly into one another's eyes.

"Well, that's that!" exclaimed Faversham abruptly. "You can't tell by the taste, that's why I chose bicarbonate of soda. But we shall know in a minute or two."

With exaggerated calmness, betrayed by a slight trembling of his fingers, he unloaded the automatic, and laid it aside. "Sorry I had to use that threat," he said. "It seemed damnably melodramatic, but you might not have seen eye to eye with me, except under compulsion. Quarter to six, by jove! Not too much time for the survivor to think out the yarn he's going to spin to Hanslet, is there?"

Dr. Priestley made no reply. His heart was beating too violently for him to trust himself to speak. Was it the effect of the drug, or merely the tension of suspense? He could not tell. It seemed to him that every now and then his heart missed a beat. He felt a cold perspiration oozing on his forehead, but felt utterly unable to raise a hand to wipe it away.

Strange symptoms which he had never before experienced clamoured for his attention. A trembling of the knees, tingling sensations, alternately hot and cold, up and down his spine. He fancied that breathing was becoming difficult, that only by an effort could respiration be maintained. Had he chosen the fatal dose? As the minutes crawled by, and the silent suspense grew even more unbearable, his belief that he had done so gave place to certainty.

He had a horrible sensation that his legs were giving

under him, and he stretched out an arm, clutching at the bench for support. And at that very moment, Faversham's voice rang out, startlingly loud upon the tense silence. "Give me your arm, Priestley! I'm done."

In a flash Dr. Priestley's preoccupation with his own fancied symptoms vanished. He saw suddenly that Faversham, deadly white, was swaying upon his feet, and caught him by the arm. Unsteadily he led the stricken man to the chair which he had just vacated. Faversham fell heavily into it. "You've won, Priestley!" he gasped.

3

Superintendent Hanslet arrived at Markheys in a taxi hired at Weyford station, to find Dr. Priestley awaiting him at the front door. "Hallo, Professor!" he exclaimed. "I'm on time, as you see. What have you got to show me?"

"That can wait," Dr. Priestley replied. "I am sorry to say that Sir Alured has been taken very ill. Will you send your taxi back to Weyford at once, with a message to Doctor Gainsforth to come out immediately?"

Hanslet gave the message to the taxi-driver, and as the man drove off he turned to Dr. Priestley. "That's bad!" he exclaimed. "Where is Sir Alured? Is there nothing we can do for him?"

Without a word Dr. Priestley led the way to the laboratory. The automatic and the two beakers had disappeared. But in the wooden arm-chair sat Faversham, his muscles relaxed, and a strange smile, almost of triumph, upon his lips.

Hanslet, with a startled exclamation, ran forward and bent over him. "Why, good lord, Professor, Sir Alured is dead!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, he is dead," replied Dr. Priestley mechanically. "A sudden collapse. But we shall hear what Doctor Gainsford has to say."

The death of so distinguished a person as Sir Alured Faversham affected Hanslet to such an extent that it put the real object of his visit out of his mind. It was not until the body had been conveyed to the mortuary at Weyford, and the Superintendent and Dr. Priestley were on their way back to London, that the former referred to the matter. "By the way, Professor," he said. "I gathered from your note that you were going to help me to clear up that Venner business?"

"Yes," replied Dr. Priestley. "But naturally, Sir Alured's sudden death makes it impossible to obtain a statement from him. However, during a conversation which we held before he died, he expressed certain doubts as to the identity of the man found frozen to death outside the gates of Markheys."

"What, Charles Alcott, do you mean?" Hanslet exclaimed.

"Yes. Sir Alured confided to me that he had reason to believe that he had been mistaken, and that the man identified by him as Charles Alcott was, in reality, Ernest Venner."

Hanslet whistled softly. "So that's what happened to Venner, is it?" he exclaimed. "Funny that Sir Alured should have been mistaken, though. A case of remarkable likeness, I suppose. Well, I shall have to see the Chief about it, and suggest that we apply for an exhumation order."

The inquest on Sir Alured Faversham took place two days later. Dr. Priestley's evidence was to the effect that the deceased had made an appointment with him to inspect his laboratory. While they were there, Sir Alured had been taken ill, and had died without Dr. Priestley being able to render him any assistance.

Doctor Gainsford, who had performed a post-mortem, gave his evidence at length. Sir Alured had died of sudden failure of the heart's action. There was no organic disease to account for this, but such cases, though uncommon, were not unknown. It was one of those cases in which a sudden seizure would not have been foreseen.

A day or two after Sir Alured's funeral the body of the man who had been buried as Charles Alcott was exhumed. It was identified by Christine Venner and Doctor Oldland as that of Ernest Venner, principally by the aid of a peculiarly shaped mole upon his neck. Christine Venner, once she had overcome the horror of her ordeal, seemed distinctly relieved.

And, on the following evening, Dr. Priestley, having bound Oldland by a promise of the strictest secrecy, told him the whole story. "Under the circumstances, I think you will agree that I have acted for the best," he said. "It seemed to me that justice was already satisfied, and that a complete revelation to the police would only have injured the innocent."

"Justice?" replied Oldland slowly. "Yes, justice seems to have looked after herself, all right. She's not so blind, after all, in spite of the bandage over her eyes. Venner murders his uncle, and gets murdered in turn by Faversham. Faversham? Well, Faversham challenges you to a duel, of his own devising, and gets the worst of it. Damned lucky thing you chose the right beaker. Had you any idea?"

"Not the slightest. To all appearances the two powders were exactly similar. Faversham's conditions were perfectly fair. But I confess that I would not willingly undergo again five minutes of such suspense."

"No. I think I can guess what your feelings must have been. Lucky it didn't occur to Hanslet to search

the laboratory then and there. If he had found that automatic he might have asked awkward questions."

"He would not have found it," Dr. Priestley replied with a faint smile. "I put it in my pocket before he arrived."

Oldland laughed. "Leaving no clues about, eh? Just like you, Priestley. And you washed up the beakers, I suppose? But, after all, it would have taken a lot to arouse Hanslet's suspicions. He's a great respecter of persons. It would never occur to him that Sir Alured Faversham, Knight of the British Empire, confidential expert of the Home Office, could ever be a criminal."

He drank up his whisky and soda, and then continued, "That was his strongest card, of course. The police don't care to question the evidence of a man in his position. But, apart from that, his murder of Venner and his identification of the body as that of Charles Alcott was a devilish clever piece of work. And the way he talked to us! You remember his lecture on the subject of identification? That was masterly! You felt, after that, that there was no possible room for doubt that the dead man was Charles Alcott."

"Then, on the whole, you agree with my policy of silence?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"I agree absolutely. Justice being satisfied, I see no reason why Lady Faversham and the daughters should suffer unnecessarily. But what about that sum of thirty thousand pounds? Isn't there any danger of that being traced?"

Dr. Priestley shook his head. "I think not," he replied. "Faversham had ample time to change the notes and bills and pay the proceeds into his own account. That he did so change them is proved by the note traced by Hanslet. Faversham himself presented that note, I have no doubt. Being called upon to endorse it, he did so with the name of Charles Alcott, thus

furnishing additional evidence of that individual's existence."

"In that case his heirs will inherit a slice of old Hinchliffe's fortune?"

"They will, and I can see no great injustice in that. I regard that sum as the price paid by Miss Venner to avoid her brother being branded as a murderer."

"If I know anything of the fair Christine, she'd rather have the money," replied Oldland. "However, that's a detail. Lady Faversham, no doubt, will put it to far better use than she would. There's one thing that rather flatters my vanity. I was correct in my suspicions as to the cause of Hinchliffe's death, after all."

A very brief notice in *The Times*, some weeks later, informed the world at large of the wedding between Mr. William Coleforth, solicitor, and Miss Christine Venner.

"And that's the last we shall hear of that business," remarked Oldland, when Dr. Priestley pointed it out to him.